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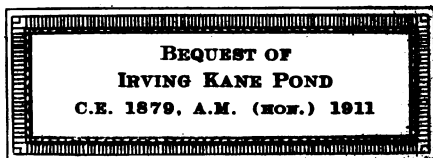
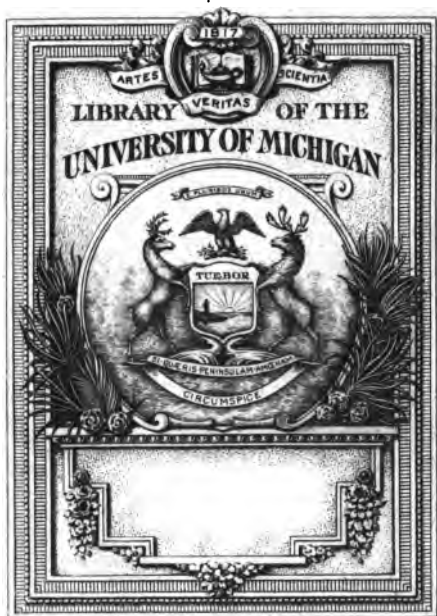
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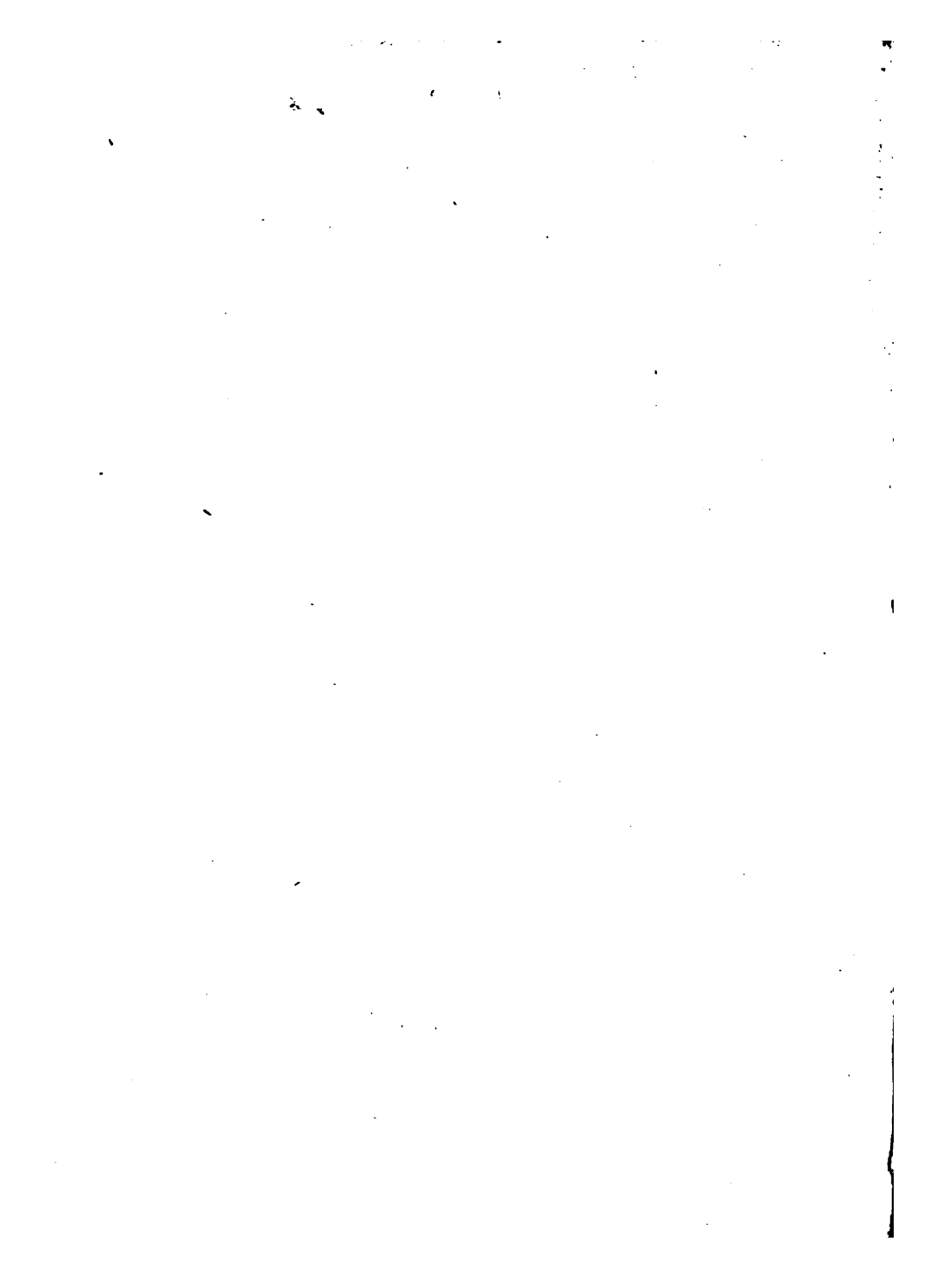
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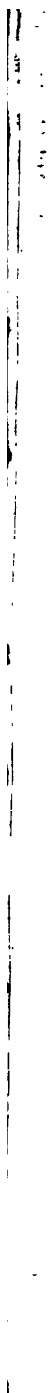


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1903











A SOCIAL LION

BY

ROBERT DOUGLAS CAMPBELL

ILLUSTRATED

CHICAGO:
THE LION PUBLISHING CO.
1903



A SOCIAL LION

BY

ROBERT DOLLY WILLIAMS



ILLUSTRATED

CHICAGO:
THE LION PUBLISHING CO.
1903

Extract from Chicago Journal:

"The Potter family suppressed the book which brought such a whirlwind of criticism down upon the head of the young daughter, and it was under orders from the family that the plates were destroyed. There was no need to buy up copies of the book to get it out of the market. The first edition was sold two days after being placed on sale. * * * * *

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Just how much in accord Miss Potter was in the suppression of her effort is not known. From reports of the matter, however, there was no brooking the will of the other members of the family.

MISS POTTER'S NOM DE PLUME.

When 'A Social Lion' made its appearance Miss Potter took as her nom de plume, Robert Dolly Williams."

CHAPTER I.

THE DRESSING-ROOM OF LA CARALITA.

The low rapid tones of a woman's voice, a quick rejoinder, and then a light ring of laughter came from behind the closed door of the dressing-room. The group around it outside closed up their ranks and watched expectantly. Presently a man who stood with his back to the door, and whose head had hitherto drooped forward, straightened up before them and spoke:

"Now, fellows, move on there! She's coming out directly, and doesn't want you blocking up the passage. She says so."

"Humph! Bobby's her latest," sneered one of the party, in high collar, top hat, and with the inevitable cigarette between his lips. "He can order at our expense for to-night. Never mind. She'll choose again in a week; and then, ta-ta, Courtenay!"

With this, and a patronizing flap of his fair hand the man went off toward the dirty stairs, followed by the rest of the characterless forms. Robert Courtenay alone remained at the door of the dancer's dressing-room. His tall, slender figure, handsome face, with its gray eyes, egotistical mouth, and the closely-cut, curly, black hair, were in prominent contrast to the vapid features of the club-men who had

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just disappeared toward the wings. And still, Robert Courtenay was one of them, heart and soul. His aristocratic family had left him this, together with an inadequate fortune, as his heritage. Only at times was he more dare-devil, more totally reckless than it was possible for them to be. They knew him well, liked him well, were secretly consumed with envious awe of him. He knew them, liked their admiration, despised them, and mocked at himself for knowing them and their ways.

This periodic pursuit of some woman was one of their ways, and one to which Courtenay took with peculiar ease. He was more than ordinarily popular with the unreasoning sex, and had never yet discovered one of them unwilling to yield all her time to him and his graceless caprices. The ease of his conquests made him fickle, and little Garth had been wrong when he dared the remark that it was La Caralita who would choose again. Not so. She might hold herself lucky, he knew, if she could keep Robert the redoubtable, at her side for another ten days. Courtenay, too, knew this, and smiled as he mused at her door. Presently the dancer came out. The five-minute bell had sounded.

Helen Howard was, for her class, a remarkable-looking woman. She did not appear old, but she was not young. Wrinkles had not come, but in her great dark eyes shone the strange, baffling light that grows more brilliant with each blow of Fate. She was not a small person; her eyes were brown, her hair, under the yellow wig, of a deep red, her teeth were small, her nose short and straight, her mouth sensitive,

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and her forehead white. Over her black tights and rose-colored gauze she wore a long gray cloak, which she drew more closely about her as she hurried up the stairway toward the stage. Her appearance was made from a large canvas rose, which stood nodding quite naturally in the center of the stage at a height of some fifteen feet. She herself was cramped into the hollow of the flower during a preliminary ballet, and it required no little art to spring forth at the right instant and flutter gracefully to the stage upon her rose-leaf wings, supported by a steel wire fastened to the back of her flexible bodice.

La Caralita was an artist. There was no farther-famed dancer on the stage at that day than she. She had earned her reputation and her two thousand a week by years of hard, hard work, at a cost which only she alone could understand. Time had steadily intensified the bitterness of her sacrifice until her memory became a bondman which never left her, even now, as she smiled an *au revoir* upon Robert Courtenay, and climbed carefully up into her flower-box.

The orchestra dropped from the last chords of the overture into the first notes of a quick, swaying dance. The curtain rolled back, and a little applauding murmur from the people, expectant of their dancer, died away. A rosy light flooded the empty stage. Then from the wings came the ballet, brushing by the little crowd of dress-suited creatures whom the manager had not the pocket to command to the front. Now, the flower girls circled, broke into stars, formed again in squares, advanced, retreated,

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and finally paused in a serpentine wave about the great pink rose which was slowly unfolding its huge petals. Here was La Caralita's cue. The flower stood open, the dancer's head appeared. There came a succession of rapid jerks. The wooden stem quavered and creaked. There was a woman's scream. A wire fell from the flies; then came a heavy crash, and in the center of the stage lay a heap of debris, soiled canvas, splinters of wood, bits of netting, and in the midst of all a palpitating mass of shredded gauze, rent silk and streaming hair that covered a woman.

Just how it happened no one knew. By now the curtain was down, the music stopped, the stage-manager before the audience, and the queen of her art lying supine on the stage, unconscious and groaning, after a fall that might well have killed her.

A throng of men and women from below, half dressed, half wigged, daubed with paint, were pouring up the narrow stairs, crying out to know what had happened. The ballet-girls for the most part wept hysterically. One or two, however, more sensible than the rest, knelt beside the still senseless woman and took her hands, while some men fanned her vaguely with their hats and shouted for brandy. At length, to the relief of all, Dobbs, the manager, appeared, anxiety and steadiness in his face, biting words on his tongue, and authority in his very walk. Under his direction matters progressed.

Four scene-shifters lifting La Caralita gingerly, carried her downstairs and placed her on an extemporized bed on the floor of her stuffy little room. Here

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Fifine, her maid, weeping excitedly, took her in charge, bathing the rouge from the flushed cheeks, wiping the black from the quivering lashes, plucking off the confining wig, and straightening the rags of tulle that hung in masses about her.

A moment later the dancer, brought shudderingly back to life through copious administrations of liquor, languidly opened her eyes and looked up at her attendant. A wrench of pain forced another groan through the pallid lips, and the poor creature cowered back among her pillows, crying dizzily.

There was a murmured chorus of voices near at hand, and through the half-open door could be seen the same group of men that had waited for the appearance of their latest fancy before the curtain had risen. Their phrases were rapid now. Some of them had even lost a part of their resemblance to the lay-figures in tailors' windows. But the odor of Turkish tobacco was still strong in the passage. La Caralita, in the dressing-room, closed her eyes and turned her head away. That scene was so wearily familiar, and this land of pain so strangely new.

"Send them away, Fifine," she said, hoarsely.

Before the maid had risen from her knees, however, a man entered the room and slammed the door tight shut in the faces of his companions. It was Courtenay again. He stood in the center of the little place with his hands in his pockets, looking at her with a bored expression.

"Another advertisement, eh?"

There was a slight pause, for the woman did not instantly grasp his meaning. When it came to her

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at length, she gave a painful exclamation of anger, a moment later breaking into a bitterly tragic laugh.

"I'm keeping the delusion up well, you think?"

The cynical gray eyes under the black lashes changed a little as he went nearer to her.

"Where are you hurt, then," he asked, more gently.

She looked at him without answering. The cut of his first words had gone deep. But he could find a reply if he chose in the agony of her dim eyes. No acting could force such an expression into them, and no words could equal the power of their silence. All her soul was in them, and for the first time in his life Courtenay recognized a little part of the utter helplessness of a woman of her profession when her day is over. He threw back his head and shook it; a trick of his when he was not pleased with himself.

"Dobbs has sent for a doctor, Helen. He ought to be here by now. Just lie still, and don't fret till he comes. It mayn't be so bad. Knocked you up awfully, though, hasn't it—dear? I say, Fiffine—a—haven't you a negligé of some sort here for—for Helen? Get those rags off, if you can. They're frightful."

The girl came up immediately with a long loose gown of silk and lace. Courtenay, bending over the injured woman, took her hand and kissed it, looking at her with a queer tenderness in his face.

"Good night," he said. "I'll see that you're looked after."

Helen smiled, and her smile was rarely sweet. "Good night, Bob," she said, softly, through her

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pain. "Don't think of me. You'd be better off without a thought of such a one as I."

"Don't turn moralist, Helen," he returned sharply, drawing his brows together.

The dancer closed her eyes and slightly shook her head. So, without another word between them, he had shrugged his shoulders and was gone.

Now for the space of five minutes Helen Howard was left alone with the maid. Fifine stood beside the dancer, and eyed her closely for a second, but the dark eyes were closed, and the spasmodic breathing came more easily. "She is asleep," thought Fifine, who forthwith seated herself at the chaotic dressing-table and applied one or two of the instruments thereon to her own face. This was an amusement of which a woman does not readily tire, and the mirror was still returning the contemplative gaze of two non-descript eyes when there came a succession of rapid taps on the door. Fifine knew the author of those taps, and lost not an instant in throwing open the door. She had a wholesome respect for the manager, who stood without, with another man, and was slightly relieved to behold Dobbs walk away again rapidly toward the scene of his unlucky performance. The other entered immediately, with the explanatory remark, "I'm the doctor."

The small man closed the door carefully, and trotted at once to his patient's side. Doctor James Bartwick Kent was the best known physician about town. This was due to his wife, who was an imposing figure, indeed, in Chicago society. In respect to this estimable lady, then, we will refrain from

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explaining just how her husband was able so quickly to reach the remote locality of a second-rate theater.

Dr. Kent was a short, stout, cheery little fellow, with white mutton-chops, and gold-rimmed spectacles, which found a difficult resting place upon his jolly little nose. Pince-nez were absolutely out of the question. He was in evening dress, and his tiny feet twinkled merrily in patent leather pumps. He had stood looking down at his prospective patient thoughtfully for a moment, when Helen opened her eyes and looked at him with recognition.

"Jim? Oh, I'm glad you've come!"

The doctor carefully felt her pulse. He shook his head over it. "Now, a short examination, Helen. I'll be as careful as possible."

There was a series of rapid little taps, nods, and fingerings over his patient, while Helen turned her head from the doctor and set her teeth. Then the little man stepped back, and looked thoughtfully at her, putting his ten fingers together.

"Aha! I see. Not so bad after all. Some slight injury. For six months you must be careful, but after that you'll be as light as before on those toes of yours."

"Six months! It's impossible!"

"Pardon me. It's not only possible, but absolutely necessary. If you were to be operated upon it would be quite different. But an operation is not to be had in your case. At least until I can make a thorough examination, I should be willing to swear that it is simply a sufficiently serious internal con-

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tusion. Six months, my dear girl. Six months, or I refuse the case as hopeless."

"Hopeless—hopeless," repeated Helen Howard, in a dreamily expressionless tone. "Why not better so? You know my reasons, surely. You cannot imagine that I have laid anything by. Why not better death than an almshouse?"

"If that were the choice, well and good. But it isn't death that lies before you. It is life-long invalidism, Helen."

"Oh! great God! what is left me, then? My day is past. I've nothing left to sell. What men give away flowers and diamonds? Another takes my place before the public. I am a memory—to them. Are you unworldly enough to think that people cherish such memories? Don't scowl, Jim. Tell me, would the plate be heavy when returned to me from my congregation?"

The doctor was silent for a moment before her. Then he spoke hesitatingly. "I admit that these old admirers would not be likely to stand by you at this time. It would hardly be human nature, you know. You give nothing—they give nothing. Like everything else, it is a case of traffic more or less. But I was not thinking altogether of these men. You cannot have forgotten—can you?—a certain gentleman whose gift of a plain gold ring I see has been removed from its finger? I can remember him, and the old days well, even yet. Can you place no reliance, Helen, on your husband—Her—"

"Fifine! Fifine! Go and tell some one to call a car-

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riage. We must have one to go home in. I shan't want you for a few minutes, you know."

As this shrill interruption broke upon the doctor's words, he turned toward the woman who lay twisting with the pain which the sudden movement had caused.

"I beg pardon," he said, earnestly; "I really forgot the girl."

"But how near you came to pronouncing his name! Why, Jim, even in my sleep I think I keep watch over myself for fear I should speak it. You and he and the priest were the only ones that knew it. Through all these years I have kept his secret as a holy trust, and now I find you referring to it as if it were something to be talked of every day! Have you ever breathed it to any one else? Don't you realize how much is at stake—for him?"

"Yes, Helen; I do and have realized what a responsibility rested with me in sharing that secret. No one has ever learned it from me. But now, here, my sympathies are with you. Your sacrifice was a noble one, but—"

"My sacrifice? It was no sacrifice. At that time he was as penniless as I. I had my choice, and I chose my liberty. That is all. It is different now, but that can never make any change for me. I—I do not ask it."

The conversation was closed. Kent could say nothing more. But he felt so strongly on the subject that he failed to hear the entrance of a third person, whose appearance sent the color flying into the dancer's face, and as instantly it paled again as

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she watched him. Kent was made aware of his presence by a cap and ulster which were let slip to the floor behind his feet, and he turned to stare amazedly into the face of Helen Howard's husband.

Herbert Stagmar was not a short man, but one so muscularly built that he impressed one more with the broadness of his shoulders than with his length of limb. His head was superbly poised; his face that of a strong man. His hair was brown, not thick, and slightly wavy. His forehead was powerful, his brows straight, eyes of steel blue, nostrils sensitive as those of an Arabian horse, his chin smooth and finely molded, and his mouth straight and strong. There was a certain majesty in his movements, that was accustomed to make people who knew him but slightly somewhat nervous and awed in his presence. This last was possibly due in part to his reputation, which was great enough to make him the equal, in the eyes of his countrymen, of any crowned head of other nations. He carried about him an undeniable atmosphere of conscious power, uncontrollable ambition, unthwarted success; but he had never been called conceited. He was beyond conceit. He was rarely flattered, for he was beyond that, too. People who knew him thought often of him, feared, worshiped, envied, admired, sought after, hated, but never despised him. All of his known actions were quoted, discussed, and commented on continually. His inner life—that which he chose that none should know—was, curiously enough, in this curious world, never known. He had the invaluable faculty of secretion.

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Stagmar to-night was clad in a rough suit of brown tweeds, for it was not his habit to frequent such places of amusement. He had been upon one of his periodic expeditions into the heart of the vulgar district of an ugly city, and had passed the theater from whose posters his wife's name stared at him, in his return to cleanliness. Outside its doors he caught the rumors of the accident, and had immediately sought the dressing-room to which his name admitted him. It was supposed by Dobbs that the great writer was seeking data for a story.

When Stagmar entered he had given his wife one rapid look, which checked the exclamation that had arisen, with her color, to her lips. Kent, after seeing him, was silent, waiting to perceive the purpose of his friend's coming. The dancer's husband did not keep them waiting.

"They told me, Helen, that you had been severely injured."

"They told the truth," she answered in a low voice, scarcely looking at him.

"Yes. It's quite true," Kent put in. "I've been saying to—to Mrs. Stagmar—pardon me, Herbert—that a retirement from her profession and entire rest will be necessary for some months."

"I trust," replied the writer in a calm voice, "that Miss Howard will not oppose such a necessity."

Helen Stagmar looked her husband squarely in the face. She was perfectly colorless, and her lip curled defiantly. "Miss Howard does oppose a necessity, and for very good and sufficient reasons, Mr. Stagmar," she answered quietly, with something nearer to

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contempt in her tone than she had ever used before toward this man.

At her words Stagmar smiled, genially and still with an illogical sadness. "I beg your pardon, my dear," he said.

She looked at him for a moment with quivering lips. He was himself, as she had known him, always. In another instant she burst into a passion of uncontrollable sobs.

"Come, come, Helen, this is unnecessary. I came here to discuss many things with you. There is no time to waste. Calm yourself, for we must see what is to be done. Kent, kindly see to a carriage. I shall want about twenty minutes," he added in an undertone as the doctor rose at once, and, after nodding agreement, went to join Fifine.

For the first time in a little more than three years Herbert Stagmar and his wife were alone together. The man sat silently beside her couch as she struggled painfully to regain composure. He remained perfectly passive, but his simple presence acted upon her like a draught of some soothing drug. In three or four minutes she lay quiet, only sobbing convulsively at intervals, as a child does after a punishment. With her eyes resting intently upon him, Stagmar began to speak:

"You must surely understand, Helen, that I am well aware of your reasons for not being willing to undergo the rest which Kent has prescribed for you. Your entire independence of me, ever since we separated, has hurt me often, but I would never interfere with what you rejoiced in as your liberty. I know,

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too, that with the life you have led, you could not, even if you had cared to, have laid by sufficient money to carry you through a time when you would be incapable of earning any. Understand that I have no wish to break that compact which we made many years ago. I cannot receive you into my house, nor, after the necessary arrangements have been made, shall I even visit you. I am a selfish man. My name and fame are all in all to me, for they are all I have. Nevertheless you are still, in a way, my wife. I cannot permit you to suffer, bodily. Therefore I say to you something which I request you not to oppose. During the next six months you must accept my support. You shall live where you choose, and shall choose whom you will for a companion. A suitable allowance in every way will be made, and you must be settled within two days. That is all I have to say; but I shall remain with you to-night until you have accepted the fact. I am sorry to appear harsh to you, as I do, I see, but I've been growing harsh of late years, I fancy, Helen."

It was some moments before Helen Howard spoke, and when she did so it was with dreamy, cat-like precision:

"And Joan? Had you forgotten that all these years I have been dancing for two?"

"Oh! I had forgotten your child, I confess. Is she not provided for?"

"No. And there is something that I must say to you. Something that you must know and believe. You have never once called her yours, Herbert. I have noticed that—I used to cry over it bitterly in

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those last quarrels. But she is. She is our child—yours and mine. You *must* believe that. I have supported her through these years gladly. It has not been hard, and I should not have wanted to yield her even to you. I have seen her several times. She is very beautiful, Herbert. I do not wish to give her up.”

“I have not asked you to give her up. She must be old enough by this time, however, to be able to earn something for herself. She is—she must be seventeen.”

Helen had looked fixedly at her husband during this speech. A light color tinged her cheeks as she spoke again. “You do not believe what I tell you?”

Stagmar slightly shook his head. “It is so obviously to your interest, Helen.”

“Oh, how low I must seem to you, if you will take such a point of view. Would to God, Herbert, that there were some way of proving to you that I am telling the truth! It is for the girl’s sake—and for yours, too, Herbert. Joan has seemed to me like a bit of your soul put into a woman’s body. She might almost make up to you, if you would let her, what you lost in—in me. Why wouldn’t you see her just once?”

Herbert Stagmar shook his head impatiently to stop her speaking. He had retreated into a corner, and was studying over something. La Caralita knew his ways. He had not changed. She watched his face anxiously, knowing by its expression that his mind was working rapidly. Stagmar’s argument with himself was arbitrary. He had always been rather given to ways of action which the world deemed remark-

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able and unwarranted. He was proud of his sympathy with outcast humanity, and to this his private works bore ample testimony. It would be through a winding course that one would have to follow his logical sophistry this time, and it is perhaps fairer to him to state merely the conclusion at which he ultimately arrived, only pausing to remark that he had this time accomplished rather more than he set out to do. At the end of five minutes he turned toward his wife with a simple remark: "I will adopt the girl, but she must be called Joan Howard." Then he added as an after-thought, "Of course, living with me she will be treated as mine, but she can have no mother."

Tears that were rather bitter brightened the mother's eyes at the last words, but they were not allowed to fall. "Thank you, Herbert," she said a little brokenly. "You are just. I have not asked for more than that."

"Had you been what in those days I was foolish enough to pray you to be, I would have given to you all that is wasted in me now. But, as you are, what more can you be to me than to—well—Snippington, let us say."

"Snippington!" Helen gave a little cry, and for the first time clutched Stagmar's arm nervously. "You know of him, Herbert? Then do not let him learn that he is discovered. He would kill me, Herbert, if he should be exposed."

"Kill you? Is he brute enough for that? However, you're in no danger. None of us who know it cares enough to tell. He's a cad. I doubt if the

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ladies who attend his church so devoutly would believe—”

There came the doctor's tap at the door. “One thing more, Herbert. You—are no longer of the faith, are you?”

“No, Helen; I am nothing. I have discarded both a creed and a God. The God of men is not worthy of worship.”

“Oh! but Joan?” she added, breathlessly.

“I attempt no influence in religion. My daughter shall choose her own belief.”

Helen sighed heavily. Not even his use of the word daughter could take her mind from the weight of her sacrifice of faith, as she knew it. But her “so be it” was said.

Stagmar had been a little surprised at himself at the ease with which he was able to pronounce that word, and surprised, too, at the pleasant warmth which crept into him at the knowledge that something human belonged to him.

Kent and Ffine entered together. “The carriage is ready, Miss Howard, if you are. You had better not attempt to walk Lie still there, and Stagmar and I will take you up just as you are, on that rug. You must have a warm wrap, though.”

The little man looked about helplessly, until Ffine approached with a heavy cloak of black velvet edged with gray fur. After it was on, La Caralita lay back for a moment, faint with the effort of rising. She was utterly unconscious of her husband's eyes fixed on her with an irrepressible sorrow. And at that moment no one knew the heartbreak in his soul. Never had

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painter a subject like this. Here, in the subdued light, all the age and weariness and sin in the face of the woman were hidden, and her features were white and delicately strong. Her glorious red hair waved back from her head in rough masses, her eyes were dark and velvety as night, and the rich folds of her mantle made a marvelous background for the transparent jeweled hands which might have done so much that was good, and had done so much that was—not good.

The writer and the doctor bore her slowly, painfully, toward the carriage. The maid followed behind, carrying extra wraps and pillows. They placed her upon one seat in a reclining position, while Kent and Fifine sat opposite. The dancer smiled faintly out at the little crowd which had gathered at the door, clenching her hands in her pain, and looking in badly-concealed anxiety toward Stagmar.

"Are you not coming?" she asked in an undertone.

Stagmar lifted his hat, and bowed gravely. "I should inconvenience you," he said, politely; then seeing her eager disclaimer, he added in a different tone, "No, really Helen, it is impossible. I shall come to your hotel to-morrow morning for a few moments, that the arrangements may be completed. Expect me at twelve, and until then you are to resign yourself entirely to the doctor. Good night."

While the little group of men went back into the theater, gossiping eagerly over what they had seen, Stagmar watched the carriage drive out of the alley in the darkness, and then he, too, moved away toward the

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avenue, thinking deeply. He confessed now that he had astonished himself. Had not the old fascination died yet within him? Could he still feel for this woman? Verily, she merited no kindness from him, though she had been his wife; for Herbert Stagar was an upright man, one who loathed bestiality in himself with all his heart.

Helen Howard, burning with fever in her hotel bed, the delirious phrases running incoherently off her lips, was still happier than it seemed to her she had ever been. Before her distorted vision rose what appeared to her to be a great ball of glorious, warming light, and the name that she called it by was the next day's noon.

CHAPTER II

THE COMING OF JOAN.

A very trim footman and a very slim maid, both in the garb quietly suited to their positions, stood side by side on the platform of one of the great railway stations in Chicago. They spoke together occasionally in subdued tones, now and then glancing expectantly at the clock on the side of the building nearest them.

Behind these two, and waiting for the same train, stood Robert Courtenay, carelessly well dressed, bored, as usual, with a meerschaum in his mouth, and the devil in his head peering out through his eyes—it might also be added, as usual. He had come down to meet Horace Chatsworth, an artist, a friend of his, who was returning to-night from a summer sketching tour in the West. The artist's abode was Bohemia, the land where all nations are as one, the land wherein all men are brothers, the passport to which is neither riches nor high respectability, but something felt, not spoken, something innate, God-bestowed, impossible to understand, impossible to mistake. And in Bohemia Robert Courtenay, betimes a member of the Board of Trade, and of the loftiest circles of exclusion, stood a more popular citizen than his friend, the artist, low of birth, high of talent, and treasuring this citizenship as all he had.

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The November daylight was gone. It was late afternoon, and the station lamps were alight. The train from the West, ten minutes late, was due. There came the measured clang of the bell, the grinding roar of wheels, and the ponderous engine, breathing harshly with the weight of its long train, came plunging into the shed, weary with long rushing over twilight plains. The footman and his companion whispered hurriedly to each other, and moved up the platform, anxiously scanning the alighting travelers. Courtenay looked after them with curiosity. "Wonder who Stagmar's expecting," he thought; and then half unconsciously strolled off after them.

A stream-of begrimed men and women were pouring from the ends of each car and hurrying down the long platform, in the dazed manner of those who have been moving rapidly for many hours. The last person in the last car to alight was Horace Chatsworth, and just in front of him walked a young lady, clad from head to foot in ill-fitting black, her pale face hidden by a heavy veil. She was not very old to judge from her slender figure, and she was visibly puzzled at the appearance of so many people. She stumbled in her descent of the car steps, and then impatiently pushed the thick gauze from her face, revealing a pair of wondering orbs, which stared blankly at the rapidly moving crowd around her. It was a moment or two before her eyes encountered those of a man standing close beside her. No sooner had she done so than she gave an impulsive start, as if half determined to address him, and the disappointment written in her features was plain as he greeted Chatsworth with a

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cordial shake of the hand and moved off toward the distant exit. Robert Courtenay's face generally proved an interesting study to girls, especially when he exerted himself to make it so, as he had not in this case. The stranger was not left alone again, however, for she had not yet withdrawn her eyes from the retreating figure when she was accosted by the trimly liveried footman.

"I beg pardon, madam; are you Miss Howard?"

Joan turned instantly, with a relieved air. "Oh, yes, I am Miss Howard." Then with a glance of astonishment, "You can't be Mr. Stagmar?"

The footman did not smile. "I am James, Miss, Mr. Stagmar's footman. This is Jennie Merriman, the maid. If you'll please to give me your checks, I'll see to your trunks, 'm, and you can go right to the carriage with her, 'm."

Joan Howard handed the man her single check confusedly, and then silently followed the guidance of the girl, whom she uncomfortably felt to be much more at home in this position than she. The short wait in the noise outside, the long drive in the luxurious carriage, which was lighted within by tiny electric globes; the long stretches of streets that first were thronged and badly paved, and then quiet and smooth; the appearance of tall stone dwellings, and the final halt before a great marble house standing majestically alone in the center of a great square of ground, seemed to the girl's tired brain like the unreal processions of some misty dream, all so new and so unsympathetic that Joan heartily wished them dreams from which she might awake with the morning.

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With imperceptible hesitation and no little dread at heart, she followed the maid up the low steps. A great door swung quietly open, and a butler requested her to go with him. They went through a large hall, and then down a little one to a closed door. Upon this the butler rapped mildly. A voice from within said, distinctly, "Very well, Carson," and immediately the man hurried away leaving Joan standing nervously by herself before the still closed door. She found that she dreaded this first meeting with her famous father more than she had anticipated.

In a moment the door opened before her, and she was drawn into the center of a large room, walled high on two sides with books, stuffy, as it seemed to her, with heavy rugs and oaken furniture, and withal, containing many things whose ornamental powers struck her as doubtful, and of whose use she had no idea. These preceptions were almost unconscious, however, for her entire attention was absorbed in the man who stood before her. It had not fallen to her lot to see many men in her life, but this one was as different from the rest as is a king from a monk. He was not tall, she thought to herself, but before him she felt like an ignorant child, and, moreover, that there was no possibility of concealing her ignorance from him. She was not afraid of him, as many were, nor, like some, did she wish to get away from his presence. A dream of hers was realized. This was the realization of a dream.

And Stagmar? He had awaited the arrival of his quasi-daughter with unmistakable apprehension. She was here before him now, pale, tired, soiled, with

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something earnest in her eyes, and something pathetic in her mouth. He was pleased. After he had stood off looking at her for a moment, he came and took her hand.

"Your eyes, my dear, what color are they, black or blue?" he asked, without apparent nervousness.

"Neither," she answered, wondering if this were the usual manner of authors; "they're gray."

Stagmar turned his back on her for a moment, that she might not see the sudden light in his face.

He faced about again quickly, and smiled upon the girl, who was looking at him mutely. "My dear, you are in a strange world, are you not?" he asked, kindly. "Let me help you off with yours wraps; I want to see your face for one moment before you go to your room. It is pleasant for me to feel that I have some one whom I can call my own near me. You are very tired with the long journey, I do not doubt, otherwise I should greatly regret my being obliged to go to a dinner this evening. It seems like desertion to you, I'm afraid, but a long night's rest will not hurt you, I think. Your first days here will doubtless be rather dreary to you. The longing for old companions and places will be strong, I know. But it will wear off, my dear, as your interests here grow." He paused, a little suddenly.

"You are very good, fa—Mr.—"

"Father," he put in softly.

She smiled at him. That had been really kind, she thought. "I don't think I shall miss the convent much. I was very glad to come."

"It was getting too small for you, wasn't it? I

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had fancied that. I suppose, Joan, that there were some things about your coming that you did not fully understand, were there not?"

His daughter looked at him quietly for a moment. "There were many things that I was not told. There were a good many that I do not understand yet, but I thought out some of them for myself. Since I have seen you, too, it makes a great deal of difference. But," she added, irrelevantly, "my mother was very good to me."

Stagmar nodded kindly to her. "We will talk of some of these things later. Your maid will show you to your room now, for it's time I left. Unfortunately, one can't be late to a dinner. This is my study, Joan. I'm always in it by six in the morning. If you are awake and lonely to-morrow, come down. Good night now. I trust that you will find everything as you like it, and that you will be able to sleep."

He held open the door of the study as she passed out, and stood watching her for a moment as she ascended the stairs, accompanied respectfully by the maid. Three minutes later he left the house, really regretting that he had taken pains to provide an engagement for the evening. "Poor child, she thinks I have not treated her courteously. She is right, I admit; but I had an idea that sensitiveness would be an absent quality in her. Helen—Helen was right."

Meanwhile Joan had been ushered through what seemed to her the corridors of a palace, and was finally shown into a bedroom larger than that of the abbess at home, as she called the convent still. In this room she was left with the request to ring when she was

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ready for dinner. Being extremely hungry after the day's excitement, she made all speed to prepare herself for what she had been accustomed to regard as the simplest of the three meals. The preparations were made with rather a heavy heart, however, for Stagmar had been right when he had said to himself that she was hurt at her reception. Now that her father's magnetic presence was no longer near to charm her thoughts away from herself she reflected bitterly upon the many little things which had been omitted in this first meeting between two who were to spend their lives together. Convent bred as she was, Joan Howard was nevertheless too much the child of her parents to be ignorant of all the little courtesies which she had never experienced, but had read of frequently, and in her father's own books. Try as she would now to forget, her heart revolted angrily against what she decided to be pure selfishness on her father's part.

Presently, as she began to examine her room a little, she was astonished and ashamed of her anger. The furnishings were all in gray and white. Heavy gray silk covered the walls, and here and there was painted upon it a white, beribboned medallion bearing her own initials. The chairs, tables, bureau, dressing-table, and pierglass were all enameled in gray, and the upholstery was done in white. The curtains of the bed and windows were of showery white lace, caught with knots of gray ribbon brocaded in tiny trails of violets. Upon the bureau lay all the brushes, boxes, bottles, and implements which make up the modern toilet paraphernalia, and all

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were of delicate ivory and glass, each bearing her monogram upon it. Never before had the young girl dreamed of such things, and she stood aghast at the amount of work which had been expended upon herself. She had been used to no more attention than half a hundred busy, devout women who considered her almost as one of their number, and treated her accordingly, could give—and that was little enough. But Joan Howard had in her the instincts of a lady, and it was not going to take her long to accustom herself to all the strange and interesting things that her father's house held in such numbers. The two things in her room that touched her most were a bowl filled with fragrant purple violets which stood on her table, and opposite them, beneath a beautiful head of Titian's great Madonna, a Copenhagen jar bearing a cluster of tremulous white chrysanthemums. Joan had been born and bred a Catholic, and the teachings of the Church linger long in a mind well trained in them. She fell upon her knees before this newly-consecrated shrine, and the first Ave Maria ascended before it from a pair of pure young lips.

Herbert Stagmar had thought of this situation frequently—a young, womanish girl suddenly removed from the bare walls of a convent in which she had spent her life, and placed amid such surroundings as these, with all the homage attendant on wealth. Truly it was a daring risk, though a necessary one. But he had bitten his lip as he ordered the preparations to be hurried through.

At dinner Joan was astounded. As it was a Friday, and her fast day, she tossed up a half-humorous

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prayer for forgiveness for tasting the various forms of meat which she dared not refuse, for she stood highly in awe of the ceremonious Carson. She did not enjoy the meal. It seemed very long and lonely, and she would have been infinitely better satisfied with bread, milk, and fruit than with the dishes which were really simple in the eyes of Mr. Stagmar's chef. At St. Catharine's, however, the table rules had been strict, and during this meal Joan maintained her customary attitude of gravity, which passed very well for dignified nonchalance. And Carson remarked later to the housekeeper that Miss Howard resembled the master most remarkably; the effect of the tribute to Joan not being spoiled by the mysterious glance which accompanied his words.

During the meal Joan wondered dismally if she should be obliged to repeat this solitary performance nightly during the winter. No doubt her father was very popular, and always busy. She was about to address Carson on the subject, but was too timid to speak. The idea of her having invitations of her own had not yet occurred to her. Dessert over she fled the dining-room precipitately, having refused coffee, to Carson's chagrin. Upon arriving at her room, Jenny met her to say that her trunk had been unpacked, and to ask if she wished her to stay. Joan shook her head, glad enough to be alone at last.

An hour later the red head reposed peacefully on its unwontedly soft pillow. The room was perfectly still, and a watery moonbeam filtered in through the half-open window. Joan slept, and dreamed of many unaccustomed things, among others of a tall, graceful

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man with a meerschaum between his cynical lips and a devil peering from his smiling eyes.

While she sleeps, even though she dreams, we are to go back together along the road of her coming from that Western convent, and you shall learn into what sort of woman this daughter of a famous man had grown to be.

It was in Southern California, the garden of the world, that land of Spanish gentlemen and Mexican rancheros, that the followers of St. Francis reached their highest holiness. A hundred years ago the Church had good cause to look with favor upon this spot where her teachings were so reverently followed. And to-day, in those fair, secluded valleys, there still rests a remnant of that faithful company. A nunnery or two, a single monastery perhaps, and three or four convents are all, yet they prove that faith is slow to die. Helen Howard, clinging to her last possession—religion—brought her child of sorrow here, that it might be reared apart from the glamour of her own life, and remain ignorant of its father's name. Here the baby was left, and here, in the great San Gabriel Valley, sixty miles from the City of the Angels, and not so far as that from heaven, Joan Howard Stagmar grew, and thrived, and absorbed the religion of her fellows.

The child had been given the valley for a home at too early an age for acute perception of its rare beauties. She saw, but did not often note, all the subtle changes that it underwent in a single day; the glorious sun, which, rising from over a mountain top, drove a long, shimmering cloud of roseate mist up the valley

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every morning; at the hazy stretch of slopes clad by midday in varying tints of bluish-green; at the wealth of tangled foliage and the sick-sweet breaths of orange-blossom air; and later the saintly dying of the day, the life-blood of the fallen sun spilled over the deepening sky, the holiness of the evening hour tolled out by the clear, mellow clang of the convent bell, flung back a dozen times, ever fainter, from the succession of white-tipped peaks which barred the valley's end, and lastly the zephyrous stillness of night, when the silver-spangled dome arched low over the garden of this earth-world which is loved. To one world-weary it would have been a bit of paradise; to Joan, accustomed to it, it was simply her home. Unconsciously it shaped her thoughts; the grand lines of all things there molded her character, for the time, into their own forms. The girl's nature was pliable; there were all elements in her. And in her early surroundings it was the bit of Stagmar's soul, or a streak of the mother-suffering, that stood forth most prominently.

At the age of four Joan learned her alphabet, together with her prayers. She was the youngest daughter of the convent, and was copiously petted by all the older girls in the school, and also, when there was time, by the gentle, large-eyed nuns. These last the child instinctively preferred as companions to the great, noisy creatures with the heavy braids of hair and shrieks of laughter, and games, and talk which she did not understand. Later she looked to these girls not so much as companions as followers whom she might command as she liked. They were

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all tractable, and she was good to them, and kept their awe, especially by the strange speeches which she made sometimes, with her large, gray eyes wandering over the snowy peaks that looked down from a distance on the green cloister.

At an earlier age than is usual among people of her simple life Joan wandered alone down the stream to the spot where, as the poet told us, the brook and river meet. She was not reluctant to pass over. Rather, she leaped from one to the other at a single bound, and then stood still, looking back regretfully. Alas, for the woman-child whose lot was cast among child-women! She never tried, however, to make any one understand that change of emotions that had come to her free spirit, the birth of untold dreams, which no one who has been long a woman of the world remembers, and which prayer will drive away as readily as repletion of pleasure. As for a man's understanding it, it is as far from his comprehension as is the gold of a sunrise which he does not usually trouble himself to get up and see.

Joan's duties at the convent were not many. She attended mass and numerous sets of prayers. She had already as much book learning as her simple teachers could give. She sewed, cooked, swept her own cell-like room, and frequently confessed, and when all was done and said she had still several hours of the daylight remaining to her. These she now devoted to herself, seldom even seeing the new sets of country girls who were entering the school year by year. Joan was not simple-hearted. How could she be, daughter of Helen Stagmar? Her mind, like those

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companion mountains opposite, reached far up, at times into dazzling heights of space. What she found there and brought back to earth with her from the high land constituted a heart's peace in her lonelier hours. In her loneliness her thoughts sank to unfathomable depths, whence she brought up grinning, imaginary skeletons of darkness to confront her angels. While these elements conflicted over the territory of her soul, she stole off to another path, a shady, green, dreamy one, whispering promises that were like memories, called for some strange reason a lover's lane.

Verily, a daring lover he would be who ventured within these vestal precincts! Nevertheless, many a maid has walked here, not too lonely, finding an idyll in her own vague imaginings. Here for a time Joan wandered, finding the mystic password into the kingdom, but no sentinel at a gate to whom she might confide it. She waited gracefully for a while, and then, growing impatient with lagging destiny, ran out at the end of the lane, and so home through the fields at early evening, finding herself all but late for vespers. Pouting a little she began to sing, and lo! in the high strains of the "*Ora pro Nobis*," quite forgot that she had waited alone, vainly.

Sometimes Joan saw her mother, but more rarely as the years went on and that mother's name came to be more widely known. The visits were now six months apart or more, and the daughter thought of her less and less often. Helen's marvelous hair, and deeply glowing eyes, and face that bore the stamp of wide experience in a great world, usually made a

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strong impression upon casual acquaintances. But Joan was too innocent yet to read that expression, and for the rest her own mirror gave her much such a picture for herself, of thick red hair—auburn, if you like—and large gray eyes that could turn very dark, and candid brows and lips whose delicate curves baffled their reader, so that the mother's face was no novelty. She wondered over La Caralita sometimes, but for sympathetic love, Sister Elizabeth, who had held her, a six months' baby in her arms, did well, and Joan was satisfied with her care. It was upon her unknown father that the young girl wasted her dreams. He was some one to speculate over, for there were possibilities in him of anything from a prince to a priest. But for all that, Joan Howard did better without parental love than most children would.

La Caralita did not bring her daughter many gifts, and those that she gave were invariably of one species—books. Books of all kinds she sent by mail, and brought with her upon her rare visits. The convent library was small and very dry, and Helen's tastes ran in more frivolous paths. It was in deference to her husband that she selected for his child the best works by the best authors, in the best bindings possible to her income. Before Joan left the convent, therefore, she had accumulated and absorbed into her memory a very creditable library for a girl of her age. It was this which saved her from being commonplace, and it was due to her mother. All her father's books had come to her in this way, and long before she knew that he was her father, she had picked them out as more to her liking than those of any author. Helen

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read these books, too, as was amply proved by the notes, not always worthless, scored upon the margins of the volumes sent to the daughter. Joan read many of these books to the nuns as they sat together sewing. They were not usually works which would have been advised by the father confessor, and the child-like creatures listened with a pleasant terror for the footsteps of the abbess with one ear, while drinking in the stories of the lives they could scarcely dream of with the other. Joan enjoyed their astonishment wickedly, and said to herself, with a little shrug, that at least it gave them something to confess, and that if it were so extremely wicked Father Allan would surely have stopped it long ago, which was, indeed, quite true.

The young woman fed her imagination on these creations of others, but her own dreams and ambitions, gloriously vague, were forming her character. She grew impatient as many months went by. Her world had grown small to her. Was she to be left here in this safe, saintly, soul-crushing place all her young life? The thought was unbearable. Ah, child! Did you think that God had put you here with the mind you had, meaning to keep you in obscurity through many years, only to have you drop quietly into dust at last? Did you think to escape the trial? Did you imagine that each soul on earth is not tempted to its utmost limit? Wrong. Always the stancher the steel, the fiercer the blows, even till the rivet breaks.

Joan suffered acutely from the thought that she had been cast aside in her very babyhood. The one con-

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necting link with the outside world, her mother, was slowly giving way. It was many months since her last visit, and in the rare letters came no hint of a removal from the life that now grew tortuous. At last Joan broke the silence of her unhappiness and cried out bitterly, not to God, the vague Being to whom prayers were recited, but to her confessor. She did her best to express to him something of her young life and longing. She asked about her mother, and, for the first time, of her father. She begged to be allowed to depart from the convent, to earn her own bread in some city of the world. Her appeal was pathetic, but the words dropped into a small comprehension. She was answered—how?

The priest knew but little of her parentage. That little was not creditable. It would not be well for her to be with her mother, even if that course were possible, which it was not. He could perceive, however, that this was not a happy state for her, to be of the world and not in it. But he had prayed, and had received an answer from heaven for her. Joan should take the veil. That was the holy end for which she had been destined. Parents had cast her off, Mother Church opened its arms to her. Let her rejoice and give thanks for her salvation.

He was going on to say more, when Joan, who had been looking at him during the speech, white to the lips, rose suddenly from her knees, with a low exclamation half of horror, half despair, and retreated slowly from his presence, with a something in her bearing which prevented the father from following her.

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Joan Howard ascended the clean, bare, narrow stairs, and shut herself into her clean, bare, narrow room, where she had passed the most of her lonely life. Never before had it seemed to her so intolerable. With a sudden burst of desperate anger she tore from the wall a colored print of the Madonna, whose stiff attitude and expressionless face struck into her very heart with their want of sympathy. Crumbling it up in one hand, she threw herself on the floor before her window, and gazed moodily out down the beautiful, darkening valley. Her burden was mighty. She understood to the full the significance of what had passed, for she had seen a similar process gone through with. She would have neither peace nor rest until she consented to what they asked, and became wedded to that living death. She did not weep. Nothing could have made her pray. There was no escape. Her despair was mute, but mentally she cursed those who had brought her into the world. She could not put herself out of it without passing from hell to hell.

It is well that God is merciful. Even at the moment when Joan was wearily preparing for her sleepless night, Herbert Stagmar was standing in the dressing-room of his wife, the dancer. His letter came in time. Joan had given no hint of yielding to the first series of persuasions. As though the personality of its writer clung to the pages of the missive, it was not suppressed, but was given the girl to read. Though she bent so eagerly over the writing, the words were fairly graven on her mind before she could grasp their import. Despair had dulled her senses. Even when she knew that she was to go,

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her freedom was not the foremost thought within her. No, it was that she had found her father, and that he was greater in her eyes than any man.

Joan bade good-by to the nuns, the old buildings, and the valley, happily, almost regretfully. So soon is bitterness wiped from a young mind. And she set out on her long journey to her father with great joy in her heart and his letter still crushed in her hand. All was before her, the past was already fading into a memory as sweet as thoughts of old times are. And now she lies dreaming in the moonlight, in her room of white and gray, and with the morning sun will come the dawn of a vastly different life.

CHAPTER III

MRS. HAMILTON'S FROM EIGHT TO ELEVEN.

During the twenty-minute drive toward his hostess's house Stagmar endeavored conscientiously to produce a suitable frame of mind within himself. Never in his life had he felt less like sitting down to a magnificently appointed table, together with nine exclusive acquaintances, working religiously through the dozen dishes, after four of which one was amply satisfied, the rest being mere tempters toward apoplexy, and doing his best, during the changes of painted sets of priceless china, to keep up his reputation as a wit and a lion, that he might be sure of many more such invitations during the social season. This, Stagmar declared angrily to himself, was precisely what it amounted to, despite the fact that he had been to many hundreds of such dinners, and was destined to attend many more. Possibly some impatience was excusable in this instance, for not often during his life does a man behold a family walk in at the door of his lonely sanctum in the shape of a very beautiful and interesting daughter, upon whom he has not set eyes in seventeen years. Not unnaturally Stagmar would have liked to remain at home with this daughter, dine with her alone, which would have brought some bitter-sweet recollections to him, and

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later lead her affectionately into his study, there to sound the first depths of a new heart that belonged to him. But this engagement of his was of his own doing, and the shrug of his strong shoulders when he perceived that the carriage had halted at its destination, was quite apropos of nothing.

To Stagmar's relief he was the last man in the dressing-room. He descended the stairs with an air of unruffled calm, which customarily cloaked a disagreeable mood. The nine people already assembled in the drawing-room Stagmar knew particularly well, and he was glad of this, for it made his evening's task lighter. There were Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton, his host and hostess, harmless, well-dressed people; Mr. and Mrs. Bromler Van Alyn, the one enormously wealthy, being Augustus Hamilton's partner in the largest insurance house in the country, a good-looking man, the other the most charming lady in the city; Doctor and Mrs. J. Bartwick Kent, the doctor with a new pair of spectacles, his wife perfectly dressed, effusively formal, sought after, and brainless; Edith Kent, their daughter, asked to "fill in" at the last moment, slightly out of place, her sincere sweetness, loftiness of manner, and depth of thought, brought from—the heaven whence she had come most probably; the Reverend Titus Emollitus Snippington, the darling pastor of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, the saintliest lady's clergyman in the city, the most despicable man in his parish; and lastly Miss Eleanor Felton, a favorite of Stagmar's, an old maid, blunt, brilliant, with a sufficiently large income, and tact enough to disguise her real worth among the people

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she knew, thereby making herself a pronounced social success. Stagmar was the tenth and last of this gathering of choice spirits. It was a small dinner.

The author was charmed to see Mrs. Kent, hoped that he had not kept them all too long from their caviar. No, he was not making them out to be animals; he believed that animals did not eat caviar. The clocks were just chiming; he was guiltless after all.

These simpers with Mrs. J. Bartwick successfully exchanged, he passed on to the refreshing presence of Mrs. Van Alyn. She received him in her usual pleasantly quiet manner. He had not come to the first of her musical mornings, but she knew how fully his time was occupied. She hoped to see him on Tuesday. It would be very good of him. That last article in the *North American Review* was excellently written, as it would naturally be, but she must beg to differ with him on one or two points at least. He was growing too cynical. The end of the nineteenth century was surely not one of retrogression morally, socially, artistically.

Stagmar smiled thoughtfully, shook his head, and was about to reply when up came Mr. Hamilton, all solemn with the responsibility of his hostship and his fresh trouser-creases, offering his arm to Mrs. Van Alyn. The author, as guest of honor, went off immediately to his hostess at the tail of the small procession. Mr. Van Alyn was happy in the imposing shadow of Mrs. Kent, while Doctor Jim trotted modestly beside Miss Felton. Snippington was all sentimental devotion at the prospect of dribbling quotations at Miss Kent for the next three hours.

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The dining-room was grandly imposing, with its tapestry hangings of old rose, and its carved black walnut buffet, upon which reposed enough old silver for three curiosity shops. The table was in green and white, with a large centerpiece of lilies-of-the-valley and white hyacinths, interspersed with maiden-hair. The rose-colored lights glowed softly over the gold and glass, the tiny triangles of lemon were squeezed over the caviar, and the dinner—heaviest, stupidest, and highest function of society—was begun.

Bromler Van Alyn opened a general conversation with the question whether Stagmar was soon to publish another book.

"I'm playing with a novel," responded Herbert, indifferently, "but don't expect to have it published for months. My stock of wits has left me in a sad condition lately, and in order to rest them I have been doing a series of short plays for Harper's."

"How clever!" murmured Mrs. Kent, when unintentionally Edith drowned her remark.

"Weak wits for short plays, Mr. Stagmar! That is hard to believe. It is generally conceded, is it not, that nothing is so difficult to write as a short play?"

"Good short plays, Miss Kent, yes. Those require a master-hand, I admit. But good ones are those which can be effectively acted. Mine were written only to be read. They consist of a large amount of empty epigrams—in this day a step better than punning."

"I have been doing a remarkable silly thing lately," said Eleanor Felton, addressing Stagmar during a little pause. "When they first appeared I did

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not read such books as 'The Heavenly Twins,' 'Dodo,' 'A Yellow Aster,' 'The Green Carnation,' and the rest of that class which you know. I am always behind the times in literature through dawdling over the old-fashioned geniuses. Finally, however, I decided that I would know something of the things that everybody constantly referred to. For the past month I have been knee-deep in that species of novel, until my small world has been turned upside down. My brain is crowded with images of boyish roués, who fall into dissertations of the fates of life over pots of marmalade, with young children who improvise startlingly witty anthems for the benefit of visiting princes, of young women who always compose symphonies while eating breakfast, which, by the way, consists of cigarettes and grilled bones; of lady's maids who linger over pocket copies of Schopenhauer, and other incidents equally surprising but tiresome when taken by the gross. Tell me, Mr. Stagmar, are these the books that are going down to posterity as representative of the nineteenth century?"

Two or three of the company had listened interestedly to Miss Felton's speech, the others had drifted off to conversations of their own. The first of these now turned expectantly toward the author, who was smiling in some amusement at Miss Felton's extracts.

"This applies very well to a discussion begun just before dinner by Mrs. Van Alyn and myself," he said. "She was about to defend the morals and arts of our times, and I, I confess, was attacking them. Such books as you mention are a disease of the times—blasé effusions of blasé people about a blasé society. The

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higher classes of civilization in certain countries are very surely retrograding. These books are the result of a certain phase of that existence, and as such may not impossibly go down to posterity. Personally speaking, I dislike them as I would dislike and be fascinated by the drunken phantasies of an absinthe drinker. However, I gladly admit that this class of novel, like the class of people therein portrayed, is only one type. Beyond these there are a few sensible, penetrating books written also—books of simple lives by simple writers, but worth how much more than the others I cannot say."

By his words the author had opened too wide a prospect for any one else to care to keep up the discussion. After a little pause Mrs. Van Alyn remarked, quietly, "Living has come to be a serious matter in these days."

"To them that ask it shall be given, and they that seek find," murmured Doctor Snippington, just why, no one knew. It was singularly inappropriate, but Mrs. Hamilton and Mrs. Kent smiled upon him in admiration, and he was content.

"Find what?" broke in Eleanor, as brusquely as possible. She could not endure the minister. "Old miniatures, or blue and white? Nobody seeks anything in these days, except new fads or the latest disreputable lion."

The conversation was closed. Nobody felt called upon to answer Miss Felton, who had sunk back with one defiant glance, and began discussing some late chemical experiments with Kent. Snippington glared at her covertly through his narrow eyes, nervously

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seeking a congenial topic of conversation with Edith, who had grown apathetic. Mr. Van Alyn was doing his best to explain the intricacies of margins in grain deals with Mrs. Kent, and making as much headway as was to be expected. Mrs. Van Alyn talked music with Mr. Hamilton, and Stagmar entertained his hostess with mild anecdotes of Bohemian life. While he succeeded, as usual, in making himself extremely agreeable—fascinating, ladies called it—his words came with less ease than usual, for his mind wandered from its occupation. His eyes rested on the image of Edith Kent across the table. Mentally he was comparing her with the girl he had left at home. He failed, however, to judge between them.

Edith was five years older than Joan Howard, and had made her formal debut four years ago. Society she had known all her life. She was tall, slender, dignified, and rather imperious. Her self-possession was absolute. Her eyes were large and changeable, her heavy hair was yellow. Her complexion was exceedingly fair, her features strong and serene. There were few society men who had not proposed for Edith, her social position, and her money; but almost from her birth she had been tacitly destined to marry the only son of the Van Alyn, Robert Courtenay's brother-in-law Malcolm. Both Edith and Malcolm had been accustomed to contemplate this marriage with quiet acquiescence and satisfaction. They were fond of each other as brothers and sisters are. Edith was beautiful, Malcolm a very good-looking young fellow. Both were of good family, both prospectively wealthy. It was in every way suitable, as Edith would have told

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you frankly. And, as she naively added that she had never cared for any one else in her life, who would call it untruth if she concealed, almost from herself, a little quiver in her heart that spoke denial? It was so new a thing, so vague, so fleeting, that made her eyes turn from one man's gaze with a strange glow in their baffling depths.

Stagmar? Did Stagmar mean it? Yes—no—yes—he could not tell. It was a thing too ill-defined to speak of. Neither knew when it had begun. Lo! Edith had paled slightly, and turned to Snippington with a sudden, useless question. Herbert's eyes were upon his plate, and he finished the point of a most curious story. Mrs. Hamilton's laughter rippled out spontaneously. Jim Kent used to tell the author that he was the only man in the city who could make a society woman laugh naturally. And Jimmy was a blunt man, who did not flatter.

Time was passing, and Stagmar had something to say which he would be rather glad to have off his mind. During the next pause in conversation, which came at the entrance of the second entree, he spoke out, addressing every one in general. "I am desirous of offering a contribution toward feminine society this season," he began, drawlingly, conscious that the phrase which had left his lips did not sound well. His audience raised its eyebrows and waited. Stagmar was not visibly nervous, nevertheless he avoided Kent's eye with some dexterity. "I have a niece, a girl who has only just finished school, who is to take up her abode with me this winter. My sister has been dead for some years, and her desire was that

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I should take the girl when she was old enough. She is a charming little person, very young, and unused to society. Some evening within the month I shall give her an informal little debut, and may I depend upon one or two of you, who are her first acquaintances, to come and assist me?"

He stopped, smiling around upon them easily, striving to read in their faces the construction put upon his speech. In reality he suddenly felt himself despicable; he had not meant to say so much—but, kismet! Each one at the table murmured something unintelligibly polite, and there came a drop in the conversation, so exceedingly awkward that Stagmar turned to his hostess, saying some nothing in a low, indifferent tone. Mrs. Van Alyn's ensuing question was like a breath of cool air.

"What is your niece's name, Herbert?" Mrs. Van Alyn was an old lady, but extremely good form.

"Her name is Joan Howard," he responded bravely, thanking her with his eyes.

"Is she already with you?" asked Eleanor Felton, in one of her expressionless tones. Unaccountably, perhaps, Miss Felton had heard the name Howard before, and disliked it correspondingly. The author understood her manner, but answered her quietly in the affirmative, adding that she had arrived only that afternoon.

"Do not let her grow lonely, Herbert," remarked Mrs. Van Alyn, whose thoughts were customarily wholesome. "I shall hope to see her before her debut, if it is possible."

"Charming!" said Mrs. Kent, and committed her-

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self no further on the subject of this unknown young lady from school. The subject was dropped. The author was satisfied, except with the manner of his friend, Miss Felton.

Meantime, despite his preoccupation, Stagmar had been watching with interested amusement the small drama of glances being enacted by the two doctors. At the first mention of the name Howard, Snippington's little face had become slightly flushed, and a glass of White Seal did not come amiss at the moment. Nevertheless, even through its pleasant sparkle he felt the deep-set eyes of Jim Kent fixed penetratingly upon him. The little man squirmed and smirked beneath them, and made a series of agitated quotations to his unheeding neighbor. Really, it was a very small thing to startle him, but Kent was becoming almost rude. Altogether the Reverend Titus was heartily glad when Stagmar's niece was dropped. Then, as he grew steadier the minister began to wonder over the writer's connection with the name—Howard—Howard—Joan Howard. No one had ever before heard the author mention his sister. No one, as it happened, knew anything about Stagmar's family at all. He had been a great figure in the literary world. That was sufficient for his being taken up. But an entire group of unfamed, common-blooded Stagmars—that was different. Snippington's little mind made note of the facts.

The conversation now wandered amiably and aimlessly over a variety of subjects. Stagmar was absent-minded, Miss Felton bitterly sarcastic. In truth, this woman had been excessively annoyed.

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Her pride had been hurt. Her intimacy with the author was the thing in life which gratified her most. And it was a real intimacy. Every one in their circle accepted the fact. Stagmar went to her at all times, confided to her, as she had supposed, all things. And yet, now, it suddenly struck her forcibly that during their entire friendship he had spoken scarcely a dozen phrases to her of his birth and his life before he became known in Chicago. People had been accustomed to come to her when they wanted Stagmar's probable opinion on some subject; even reporters annoyed her for interviews which the writer had refused them, and Eleanor was proud of the position, for she admired her friend as she did no one else. Years before, after his first great successes, a marriage had been hinted at between the two. Perhaps Eleanor had hoped for it. But the question had never come, and now she really preferred their relationship to a closer one.

Stagmar began to be vexed with himself for having been prompted to announce his daughter's coming in that place and manner. He looked at Eleanor and called himself a fool. He beheld Snippington's thoughts written on his face, and cursed inwardly. He caught Bromler Van Alyn's quizzical squint fixed upon him, and returned it eye for eye, angrily. But from Jim Kent's open disapproval he shrank, sensitively.

Mrs. Hamilton possessed tact enough to perceive that in some way matters were a little strained, and called out pleasantly to Kent.

"Doctor, you have kept us waiting all evening,

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and the story that I see in your eyes will be all the better on that account."

"You have evidently made a study of anecdotes, and how to discover them," responded Jim, smiling broadly. "It is true that I was thinking over a little tale to myself, but as a dinner story I am afraid that it is lacking somewhat in point. It is simply one of those odd cases that we medicos run across sometimes. Possibly, however, you good church people might find some interest in it." This last was accompanied by a sharp glance at the clergyman, who suddenly found it very desirable closely to examine his water goblet.

"Doctor Snippington is searching for microbes, and Papa is telling stories of the church!" laughed Edith, gayly. "But do begin. It is such a novelty to have anything said about Father's cases! He is never professional at home."

A polite silence ensued, in the midst of which Kent began to speak.

"Possibly you do not remember—and if you do not my story is nothing—that little boy soprano who sang at St. Matthew's last Easter, and made something of a sensation; who also mysteriously disappeared afterward, and could not be rediscovered?"

"Oh, Doctor Kent! Do you know where he is?"

"Of course we remember!"

"Forgotten him! I made a tour of every church in the city to find him. I wanted him for a musical, but no one knew about him."

"Oh, yes! The one who sang the Cecilia prayer so marvelously."

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"Aha! So you do remember. Well, my story relates to him. I shall have to take you to a somewhat disagreeable part of the city, however.

"One evening about two weeks ago I happened to be down in one of the southwest settlements on a professional visit, and was returning at about half-past eight. Up town, just outside a theater I met Harold Blakely and Stillwell Drew, with one or two others. They seized upon me directly, and began talking in a chorus of some accident inside, and urged my going in. I ascertained that it was a dancer, who had had a heavy fall upon the stage, and seemed to be badly hurt. They were unable to get hold of a doctor, and my coming was quite providential. Of course, I went inside, and the manager took me to the place where she had been propped up."

The doctor kept his eyes steadily on the cloth, but now Stagmar watched him, as collected and unruffled as any man there. At all events he was made of different clay from Snippington.

"I had a moment's conversation with the actress, made a short examination, and found her rather severely injured. In the end I went to her hotel with her and the woman she had for a maid, to see her properly attended to. We got a couple of men to carry her up to her rooms, which were really very nice. In the little sitting-room that she had, I saw, as we went in, the figure of a child, a little boy, hunched up in a chair asleep. He had a choir boy's cassock half on, and had probably been trying to fasten it. I picked him up in my arms to lay him down straight on the little cot he had, and as I did

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so I recognized his face. It was that little soprano of St. Matthew's. He is the son of the dancer, and his voice, though I am no connoisseur, seems to me exceptional. His mother is very reticent about him, but I gathered that he was not permitted to sing in churches on account of his mother's profession. It's a tremendous disappointment to the little chap, and when he's alone he's always getting out his old choir clothes to dress up in. What do you think of my story, eh?"

"The sins of the fathers—" murmured Stagmar thoughtfully to himself, inaudibly, but his thought was drowned by the harsh tones of Eleanor Felton:

"It is rather ridiculous, I think, their not allowing him in a choir simply because his mother is an actress. How should we know or care to know where the boys come from?"

"As a matter of fact," answered the doctor, "the little chap never tried any choir but St. Matthew's, I believe. After he was dismissed from that his mother kept him with her. He's a mere baby, you know; scarcely more than six, I should fancy."

"Oh, Doctor Snippington!" cried the hostess, radiant with the brilliancy of her latest idea, "St. Matthew's being your own church, why couldn't you see to having the poor little boy back, now that his address is known?"

"Really," coughed the clergyman, a kind of terror stealing over him, "the—a—the choir is quite out of my province, you know, dear Mrs. Hamilton. I make it a point not to interfere with any department of the church that is not under my direct supervision. I

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feel that it would not be well for me to come in here. There might be objections, you know, from less charitable persons. Very pathetic, very sad, indeed, I know, but—" and with a shake of his head and a weak wave of his white hand the minister sank back overcome, just as the last course was brought in.

"The style of the modern anecdote is degenerating," drawled Van Alyn to his neighbor. "That is the third pointless one that I have heard this week, and they all have seemed to take somebody by the ears. Look at Snippington now."

Titus Emollitus was furiously angry—at circumstances. He dared not think that it was anything more than circumstances. But he had at least decided that James Kent was one to be avoided.

Stagmar wondered at his friend in silence. Kent was now chatting complacently to Mrs. Van Alyn. The writer could not imagine his motive in bringing up the tale. The choir boy he had not seen on his single visit to his wife, but the folly of the rector was old, well known, and well continued. The dinner had been uncomfortable.

Augustus Hamilton perceived that things were wrong, but even the study of his wife's face brought no light to him as to the cause. He was relieved when the ladies rose, and the gentlemen followed them leisurely into Hamilton's den, where cigars, coffee and liquors were served.

Van Alyn and his host drew a couple of chairs together, and began talking city improvements with great vigor, over the cognac and Havanas. The other three were left together. A dinner of ten was a pro-

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found mistake, Kent observed finally, and the others acquiesced. Snippington, a small glass of creme de menthe in a slightly unsteady hand, faced the other two. He could have snapped like a dog at Stagmar's coldly cynical face, but it was to Kent that he owed the grudge for that last bad quarter of an hour. Unfortunately, however, James Kent appeared invulnerable to him then. Through Stagmar, his great friend, the doctor might perhaps be reached. Smiling as sweetly as a woman, Snippington looked coquettishly toward the two and remarked:

"Toasts do not seem to be in order this evening, gentlemen, and yet I cannot refrain from proposing one to Mr. Stagmar, here. My dear fellow, happiness and health to you and your newly arrived niece, Miss Joan Howard."

The little eyes fastened so closely upon the other's face could detect not the faintest emotion in Stagmar's face as he responded:

"Thank you, Snippington. Let me pour your Angelica. My niece and I respond gratefully to your kindness." He emptied his glass, and then refilled it, as Kent did.

"The compliment must be returned," said the author, suavely.

"Then let us all drink," put in the doctor, "let us all drink to Snippington, and also, to kill two birds with a stone, to the long life of the small choir boy, against whom St. Matthew so evidently bears a grudge."

The singular emphasis placed upon these last words caused both Hamilton and Van Alyn to turn

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about and look toward them. Stagmar and Kent stood with glasses raised, intently regarding the minister, who was fumbling awkwardly with a decanter. Suddenly he looked up, his face fishy white, but his eyes steadily angry. "As the rector of St. Matthew's church I must decline to be toasted in company with one with whom the saint is angry," he said, quietly, with a faint attempt at a joke in his words.

The others looked at each other; Van Alyn laughed, and the subject was dropped. Snippington alone remembered the incident, but he, so long as he lived, never forgot it. For the moment, however, the feeling was too strained to admit of a longer stay in the smoking-room, and scarcely fifteen minutes after the ladies had left them they returned to the drawing-room. The whole party seemed subdued. Four of the ladies were talking quietly to each other, while Edith Kent sat at the piano which stood in a little alcove, her hands wandering idly through an impromptu melody. Stagmar, after stopping only to exchange a word or two with Mrs. Van Alyn, went over to the girl and seated himself near her without speaking. With her eyes fixed unconsciously on the writer's face, Edith began playing a few faint notes, pianissimo, which rose gradually into the great sacrament motive with which the vorspiel to "Pisifal" opens. Instinctively the conversations in the room behind were dropped. The music came like a cool breath in a burning atmosphere. Eleanor Felton watched Stagmar with some curiosity. His head rested on one hand. Not a muscle moved, but he drank in the notes like a thirsty man. Edith was no artist, and

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the music she was playing was difficult, but she loved the keys as she touched them, and thus made her phrases felt. The motives of sacrament and agony, with their rippling accompaniment, died away. The faith began, grew, led up into a glorious crescendo, and receded as it had come. The mighty Grail followed, and then the weird minor intervals that wail out the story of Kundry's terrible laugh.

The vorspiel finished, Edith did not stop immediately, but went on into the processional of the Holy Grail, its swaying rhythm marked by the deep intoning of bells. Afterward came the three choruses of boys' voices, which could not be finished on a piano, and lastly a mere suggestion of the caress motive from the second act. With this the music ceased, and her only applause was the deep sigh from her auditors. No one, even then, seemed to care to talk, and in a moment or two Stagmar rose and stood before his hostess with his good evening on his lips.

His departure broke up the company. Indeed, most of them were sufficiently glad of the signal. Eleanor Felton held out her hand to the author as they met in the hall. "Come and see me," she said in a low voice, and rejoiced at his "Thank you, if I may."

"Coming down to All Sinners' now?" inquired Kent, as he left the dressing-room with Stagmar.

"The club to-night? No, I think not. Family man, you know, Jim."

"By the way, Herbert, do you think that it was pure, unadulterated wisdom introducing your niece to-night as you did?"

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The other raised his brows and his shoulders. Though his mouth formed no words, his gesture did. The doctor was cut, and turned away without speaking again. The next instant, however, there was a hand on his shoulder, and a voice in his ear.

"You made Titus Emollitus squirm to-night, Jim. Be merciful to him henceforth if you can, and watch him work out his own ruin. Good night."

Kent laughed, and after calling out another invitation to their club, went back to send his ladies home. Stagmar, with a mixture of feelings, jumped into the brougham, and immediately began to wonder why he had not consented to go to the club. "Jim holds some great stakes in his hands," he thought musingly, "and they could easily be lost if he forgot himself for an hour."

Ah! Herbert Stagmar! when were you ever before afraid of the word of any man against you? James Kent has held that secret well during the eighteen years of your married life. Are you afraid to trust him one night more?

As Mrs. Hamilton, together with her spouse, ascended her carved staircase that night for the last time, she remarked, wearily: "I have given many dinners, Augustus, but I hope to heaven that it may never fall to our lot to give such another."

"But what was the trouble with it?" queried Augustus slowly.

And Mrs. Hamilton, looking at him heavily, shook her head.

CHAPTER IV

ALL SINNERS FROM TWELVE TO FOUR.

All Sinners' was the most exclusive club in the city. Were it only as difficult for one of us poor souls to become a sinner as it was for those faulty children of leisure who craved entrance to that miniature Sodom of luxurious fashion to obtain admission thereunto, what a heavenly place the world would become! And also, if these heavily draped walls, soft-rugged, brightly lighted passageways, arm-chaired reading-rooms (so-called), and exquisitely decorated suites of private apartments, resembled in any way the abodes in the infernal city far underfoot, I should not be wrong in observing that many a man would be content to choose them instead of the airier and less frequented mansions lying somewhere above the blue vault where the sun rides. Enough of frivolities. Our business here is with a group of very interesting gentlemen.

Horace Chatsworth, Robert Courtenay, and Malcolm Van Alyn were seated around a card-table in one of the private rooms of the club—the room which, from the result of long usage, was regarded as Courtenay's own. It was scarcely midnight, and the trio had not yet settled down to their night's amusement. Instead each was lolling negligently back in

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a deep arm-chair, a patch of gray ashes already deposited in his little silver tray on the table corner. An ice pail, containing two empty champagne bottles and a third half-filled one, stood beneath the table, on top of which were three broad-bowled glasses containing each a greater or lesser quantity of Pommery Sec. A pack of new cards lay scattered over the floor, just as Van Alyn had flung them in disgust at not being able to accomplish a new trick.

Courtenay looked bored, Malcolm sleepy, Chatsworth tranquil. It was the artist who finally broke the monotony.

"Dinner's long, isn't it? Want sixteen minutes to twelve only."

"Old lady Hamilton's dinners always are long—damned long. I thought I should suffocate, or choke, or die at her last one," growled young Van Alyn.

"Don't become violent, dear boy. Your collar'll melt, and it's excessively bad form. Come and match pennies till the doctor arrives," drawled his brother-in-law in an irritating voice.

"The doctor!" echoed Van Alyn. "Is *he* what we're waiting for? Do you intend to play whist till morning? We want five, and I'd swear that there isn't a fifth hand left in the club."

"It is late," observed Courtenay yawning, and then sending a cloud of feathery smoke from his nostrils, a process always irritating to Malcolm. "We'll play hearts."

The younger one simply shrugged his shoulders as Chatsworth remarked: "Herbert Stagmar will come

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with him. He went to dine with Papa Augustus also—didn't he?"

"There's no counting on Stagmar. He's just as likely to go off on one of his night prowls and drop in here at daylight for a brandy and soda as to come with Kent directly."

"Queer man, Stagmar. What the devil does he do on those tramps of his?"

"Plays Dickens. Hunts out characters for his stories."

"His stories are so darned mixed up lately that you can't wade through 'em," said Van Alyn, still sulky. "I wish he'd quit the impressionist, and—"

"There, there, my boy. Save your expoundings for the ladies. Ideas on such subjects hurt one's head."

The boy flung a furious look at the smiling Robert, and began pacing rapidly up and down the room. Chatsworth suddenly took his part, and smoothly inquired:

"By the way, Bobbie, how's what-do-you-call'em—La Caralita coming on? Are you still doing the devoted?"

Malcolm's womanish face flushed slightly at this bald reference to his brother-in-law's penchant for more women than one. The Bohemian was not noted for his tact. Courtenay shot an eyelid glance at Van Alyn, before he answered, with concealed annoyance:

"I haven't seen her for four days. She has removed to such an impossible locality; cross between an apartment and a tenement, I believe. She has Fifine and the boy with her. The stage won't see her

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for six months, and meantime she is doing the economy act. I ought to visit her soon, though; she'll be utterly dropped, of course."

"You're growing constant, Bob," said Malcolm, with a strained laugh.

"Merely rather sorry for her," returned the other, indifferently, lighting another cigarette, and wishing to drop the subject. Malcolm, however, was curious.

"I say, Bob," he asked, "does Snippington still—"

"Doctor Kent, gentlemen," interrupted a servant, who then stood aside.

Malcolm turned eagerly, and the others rose as the little man trotted into the room, throwing his hat and gloves into a chair and allowing the footman to remove his topcoat and bear the other things away. Doctor Jim was chuckling with merriment as he drew up a chair for himself, lighted a cigar, and waved away the champagne offered to him.

"Well, old boy, what is it? You can't keep it, you know," queried Courtenay, in amusement.

"But I say, isn't Stagmar coming," insisted Malcolm, still bent upon poker, for Malcolm was young.

"No, my boy, Herbert will not be here. And thereby also hangs a tale. In fact, Stagmar, having become a family man, no longer thinks it becoming in him to frequent the old place. How's that, Bob, for a dig at us?"

"What do you mean?" cried the artist, and Courtenay's brows went up as far as they would go.

"What I say. Oh, Stagmar's a fool! He has a niece, it seems" (here Kent became perfectly serious), "whom he has just adopted. Nice girl, no doubt, and

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fresh from school. Orphan, of course. Good of Bertie, and all that, but the idiot announced her arrival at the table to-night, and you know how that lot received it. A sarcastic smile and a grunt or two from the men, a feeble remark here and there from the ladies, and the matter dropped. Herbert was a bit sore, I think, but he said nothing."

"Oh, we comprehend the construction most probably put upon it by our dear relatives," remarked Courtenay, coolly, adding as an afterthought, "What is the young lady's name?"

Kent was put out for a moment, and he peered closely into the other's face. There was nothing to be found in that blasé vacancy, however, for Robert had a pretty talent for keeping his impressions to himself. But Kent was an old dog. His answer was careless:

"Pon my word, I've forgotten. It wasn't Stagmar, though. But let that go. I've a bottle full of gossip here that will be more to your taste than the Pommery there. Most curious dinner I ever attended."

Thereupon the doctor proceeded to recount in a lively manner the story of the minister's confusion and the matter of the toasts, which for Stagmar's sake he colored rather differently than the truth. The tale was poured into interested minds, for Snippington was no favorite among these men, except as the facts of his confusion pleased them.

After a somewhat wandering conversation, the subject of cards was again introduced.

"Hearts or whist, doctor?" inquired Courtenay, mockingly.

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Kent looked at him calmly. "Hearts," he answered, without apparently noticing Malcolm's anxiety. "Hearts be it. What stakes?"

Instantly the other two looked at Chatsworth, who was Courtenay's guest for the night. It was rather a mean thing to do, for the artist was not well off, and his pride would hardly permit him to name an amount lower than that usually understood. He took it well, however, saying, indifferently, "Dollar a heart, isn't it?"

"Five hundred to start, then," cried Malcolm, pulling out the chips, and the game began.

The first hand had been dealt, and the cards sorted. Chatsworth was pleased, Malcolm in despair over a suit of eight clubs, and the other two indifferent. The first card had not yet been thrown when there was a sound of voices in the passage. A clamor of expostulation and explanation; then one decided voice rose above the rest. "No, really impossible. Many thanks. Another time, certainly. If their game is made up I shall not play at all. See you later, my dear fellows."

Then, without announcement, Stagmar hastily entered and closed the door in the faces of the numerous hangers-on and sycophants by whom he was generally surrounded. At sight of him the four men looked up in surprise, and Malcolm with an air of decision threw down his cards and pushed his chair back. Stagmar nodded at them all, threw himself into a chair, got out a well-browned meerschaum, and with a "You don't mind?" settled back and began puffing contentedly. He did not appear to notice

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that the play was not continued, until Kent called out to him:

"Here you, Herbert, come and take a hand. We've been waiting for you for the last half hour, and haven't played a card yet."

The three others eagerly corroborated this as Stagmar looked inquiringly around at Kent, and after a moment or two of resistance, he went into the game.

Stakes were high, and from the outset the hands were good. Silence very soon fell over the party, and only the growing eagerness of their eyes and the nervous twitching of their hands told of the strain that all but one were under. At two o'clock Malcolm, rising and stumbling over a fresh ice-pail, flung his coat and tie to the floor. The doctor, who was stout, and Chatsworth, who was poor, followed his example. Stagmar and Courtenay stood it for twenty minutes longer, until their collars had become wet rags. Van Alyn was losing heavily, and the pile of chips before the artist grew, until he began to bid madly upon mere vestiges of hands. The three older men played warily, and lost lightly, but the game lay between the two. Malcolm won two or three times upon badly carried bluffs of Chatsworth's. He grew encouraged. The artist breathed heavily, emptied his glass, and found his mouth still dry. There came a hand when Kent, Courtenay, and Stagmar went out after the draw. Chatsworth compressed his lips, and threw his head back with an unreadable desperation in his eyes. The young, boyish face across the table was hectic-flushed, the musical voice high and strained.

"Five!" "Take it and raise two." "Right, and five

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better." "In, and four more." "Take it, and raise you ten." "D—— it! Fifteen more!" So came the cries, faster and faster and more incoherently. The elder men looked on with interest, Stagmar with a disgusted sensation at heart. But it was a scene that had long since lost its novelty. The chips rained upon the table. Each man stuck to his colors. Malcolm wildly raised the bids until fourteen hundred dollars lay upon the table, and half of them were borrowed. Then Kent interposed. "Not much higher, boys," he ventured. Van Alyn looked around angrily, but in another second came the hoarse whisper of the artist, "I call." Then he bent double, staring at the cards which were flung to the table—four kings. Not a word passed his lips as he quietly laid down four knaves, and rose, passed his hands over his eyes, emptied a bottle into his glass, drank it off, and reseated himself. "Doctor, it's your deal," he said.

Stagmar looked at him with admiration and sorrow both in his eyes. "By ——, Horace, I'm sorry," came in a murmur from Courtenay. Malcolm having drained a glass of whisky and soda, held out his shaking hand over the table. "Yours next time, old chap," he said, as Chatsworth took it. And then the doctor slowly dealt the cards.

The next pot went to Robert, then two to Stagmar, once each to Van Alyn and the doctor, and continually the artist lost. Again and again a handful of those celluloid disks left his hand, and he arranged a month's diet of bread and water to pay for all, but he would not stop the game. In a moment or two

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more he won—won just enough to keep him afloat for ten minutes longer. Then the old luck returned. More chips were borrowed, and money—from Stagmar.

The clocks had chimed five, and the lights were dim and blurred to their weary eyes when the men finally rose. Chatsworth's face looked old, and as gray as putty; his hands hung limply at his sides; and his ears rang with the clink of the coin that was no longer his own, with the clink of glasses now empty and foul, with the laughter that would come from the lips of men when his poverty and the cause of it should be made known. Then with fingers with which he could scarcely feel he wrote out his I. O. U.'s, four of them—bits of white paper that represented his all. Finally, with a nod and a brave, broken smile he was gone, Courtenay's guest, who had enjoyed the honor of a night at All Sinners' in company with four of the city's most envied men.

After his departure the four men who remained in the deadened atmosphere of that room stood or sat for a few moments in silence. None wished to go without expressing his feeling over the end of the game, and yet each hesitated to speak the first word. It was Stagmar who finally lifted his head, and said in a low tone, at the same time drawing a roll of green paper from his pocket:

"Gentlemen, I should like to purchase Chatsworth's notes from you. Courtenay, yours was five hundred, Kent three—let me count those out first. Thank you. Now, Malcolm—"

Courtenay and the doctor had somewhat reluc-

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tantly accepted the money offered them. Malcolm, as his name was mentioned, flushed crimson, took the paper bearing the artist's signature from his pocket, and with a muttered "Poor devil!" tore it into small pieces, which he scattered over the floor.

Stagmar laid his hand lightly on young Van Alyn's shoulder, and then with an *au revoir* to the others hastily left the building, followed immediately by the boy.

Kent and his host remained. "Rather too bad—" muttered Kent, in his deep voice, as he rang for his coat. But Courtenay, rising, said lightly, with a delicate shrug of his graceful shoulders:

"Pshaw, Kent! We're too old to be romantic, you and I. You have a wife, you know, and bad bills, and I have my little expenses also, Jim. Oh, most men have expenses, you will find, if you look carefully through the world! My little brother-in-law is still young, and also still under the pleasant shadow of papa's golden wing, while I, if I remember correctly, have been of age for several years."

So they parted, Kent with a gruff laugh, and Robert with his clear eyes half-humorously averted.

Meantime Stagmar, who had not taken a cab, was shivering slightly in his top hat, black cape coat and patent leathers, as he made his way rapidly homeward. He missed the comfort of the old cap and ulster to which he was accustomed on these rambles. It was a bitter dawn, for a marrow-piercing mist blew in from the lake by a boisterous northeaster, to filter coldly through the flesh of the careless or homeless one who wandered through the still dark streets.

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Occasionally a policeman, who happened to be awake, stepped out of the gloom a few feet away and peered anxiously after the solitary walker, curious when perceiving that a gentleman of his class and dress still held his gait at this hour.

Stagmar took no note of any of these. He was thinking on a subject over which he had pondered before, often and fruitlessly. How were such scenes as that at which he had virtually assisted to-night to be averted? Thousands of such dramas were enacted nightly in this one city alone—ay, and filthier ones. Old men were driven mad, and young ones shown life-long ruin, and none to blame and none to hold. It was pitiful—men were pitiless, shameless, blameless. The writer, with a bitter scorn, thought of the creeds of men. God made them weak that they might fall, gave them temptations so great that they must fall—and then, God bade them not fall! Where was the God of men? In these dens of sorrow, men are told. Yet He looks on at such scenes continually and raises not His hand. The Deity is superhuman, Stagmar was not, therefore he mourned over his race, and denied God. The writer could not count on his fingers the men he had hauled back from ruin—once, twice, thrice, perhaps. It cost money, which he was glad to give, and it was seldom in the end efficacious, but what more could he do? This young Chatsworth he would try to help. That was a relief. And then the man's thoughts turned toward the woman whom, of all the world, he could not forgive. Men he loved in the abstract, and their faults with them, but this woman, his wife, he had loved—oh, how

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tenderly! in the individual, and therein lay all the difference.

So musing as he hurried, Stagmar at length reached home, and let himself into the silent house softly. On his way to his room he passed his daughter's apartment, and by the door he stopped to listen, with a pleasant warmth creeping into his heart. "She is asleep," he smiled to himself, and passed on.

Half an hour later he was in his study, freshly dressed, with his eyes clear and his head steady—rather more than could be said for his companions of the night. He looked around the fine room with a glance of content. His study was his friend, his books his intimates, his desk his refuge. It was to his desk that he went immediately, and laying before him three pieces of paper which he had brought down with him, he seated himself and began a letter.

"CHICAGO, November the Fifth, 189—.

"MY DEAR CHATSWORTH:

"In the old days when I was starting out in life, and a precarious business it was, your father was the first and the best friend that I possessed. He lifted me over a good many bad places in the road, and it was by his good sense that I escaped many a folly that might have ruined me. It was a great sorrow to me, my dear boy, when he passed away from us; and his regret was that he couldn't be with you longer. Now I have finished with sentimentalizing, but I wanted you to know why I am interfering with your affairs. It is for the sake of what he was to me.

"I enclose in this letter three of the notes that you signed to-night. The fourth, Malcolm's, the boy himself tore up. These three, however hard it may be for you, you must accept. It's your punishment for having been vain enough to do what you couldn't afford to do. I'm talking plainly, you see. You

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had no business to go to that club with Robert Courtenay. You know what he is, and you ought to realize that his sphere isn't yours, and to thank your Fates that it isn't. All Sinners' is a long road to Hell for the rich, but it is too short a one for a poor man to venture upon. Henceforth keep off of it, Horace.

"Now I want something from you. Possibly you already know that I have adopted a niece. She is young, and I expect her to be a trifle lonely for a time in her new home. Anything that will be likely to distract her attention from herself I am trying to obtain. You have a pretty talent for pretty pictures. Send me one for her. She is rather an ardent church member I fancy, so if you have anything in a religious way, small Madonna or Magdalene or angel, you know the style, send it to us, and come and help me hang it.

"Remember my admonitions, and don't feel hurt over them. I shouldn't say anything to young Van Alyn about his note. If one of his class can be made to feel some remorse for pocketing another man's money, . . . encourage him in it all you can. That is rather a nice boy, it has struck me. Pity he's going to the dogs. I want to see you soon. You must know Miss Howard. Now fare thee well my dear boy. Don't bear malice, and commit no more follies.

"Always your sincere friend,

"HERBERT STAGMAR."

CHAPTER V.

"MY NIECE, MISS HOWARD."

When her father paused outside her door that early November morning, Joan had not been asleep, but rather in that state of sensible torpor which leads by slow and delicious degrees to the disagreeable moment when we open our eyes widely upon the morning. Joan sat up with a start and looked vacantly around. It was her customary hour for rising, and she had been true to her principles, even though the convent bell had, for the first time within her memory, failed to sound for her. It was scarcely light yet, and the objects in her room looked misty and unnatural to her eyes, accustomed to the crudest and squarest articles of necessity.

Changes, even for the better, present themselves for the first time with a very unbeautiful aspect to the human mind. Joan was no exception to the rule, and her fair face looked dreary, indeed, as she stepped slowly out of her great bed. Where was the excited anticipations of yesterday? Why, I wonder, do these heart-oppressing mornings ever come after the nights of oblivion ! Mornings? Only misers, machines, and birds ever like mornings.

Joan dressed hastily, though with perfect neatness, as she had been taught to do. Morning prayers gen-

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erally took more time than the morning toilet. The girl frowned a little as she shook out the somber little dress which was all she had to don. Although she had never worn one, she knew intuitively how much better such dresses as she could imagine would suit her than the little unrelieved black garment which wrinkled so despicably up the back. She realized, as well as those who judged her beauty better than she, that she had the innate genius of wearing clothes becomingly; and she suffered acute mortification as she thought of the way in which her father's steely eyes might possibly travel over her present costume. Joan hardly did justice to her father at this early hour.

Presently she knelt to pray before her Madonna, with the eyes of a soul, and here, as those passionate Catholic prayers poured from her lips, a sudden revulsion of feeling came over her. For a moment she sank to the floor, forgot the dread of her past month, shut her tear-heavy eyes, breathed the orange-blossom air, heard the clear peal of the silver-toned bell, saw the red-gold of the dawn “at home,” and then, with the chords of her throat strained tight, went slowly down the stairs to find her father at his task.

She met no one on her way, but remembering how she had come, found the study door without difficulty. Hesitating a moment, she laid one finger on the polished wood, and then, without knocking, because she had never been taught to knock at any door, quietly entered the room. Stagmar had not heard her, and she stopped still, looking at him with curiosity. He stood beside his desk, his face turned from her, his

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eyes fixed upon a photograph. Joan started slightly as she saw and recognized the picture. For fully a minute they remained so, and the girl was trying to find courage to speak, when suddenly Stagmar stepped back, exclaiming aloud:

"Oh, Bob! Bob! when and for what did you sell your soul, or did you lose it by the way?" It was a little relic of past Christianity, this speaking of souls.

"Father!" The exclamation was involuntary, for the peculiarities of the writer were quite strange to his daughter. Stagmar turned instantly, with astonishment in his face. Seeing her almost frightened amazement, however, he laughed a little as he came toward her.

"I had no idea of your presence, my dear," he said, kindly. "Naturally my remark sounded oddly enough to you. I think aloud sometimes when I am alone. It is a bad habit. Come, sit down here, and let us talk a little. You rested well, I trust?"

Joan thanked him, and seated herself uncomfortably. She could not overcome a feeling of awkwardness before him, which he saw to his amusement. He perceived this morning a strong resemblance in her to her mother, but where it lay except in the color of her hair he did not know. He noted also the quaint *gaucherie* of her dress, but his eyes were by no means steely as he looked at her quietly, waiting for the words which came hesitating from her lips:

"You must have given a great deal of thought to my room," she said at last, slowly and thoughtfully, adding a moment later, "I never have seen anything so lovely."

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The somewhat bald phrase was softened by the hesitation and musical quietness of her voice. Stagmar was pleased. "I am glad you found it pleasant, Joan. It has been a great pleasure to me to have an interest in some one again."

"Again?" Joan had forgotten her nervousness.

"Your mother, you know," replied Stagmar, coughing.

The girl looked up at him suddenly, with a light in her face. "Please tell me about her," she said, imperiously.

The writer was not surprised. He had been expecting the question.

"I can't tell you very much of her," he said, gravely. "She was not a very good woman, and she preferred other things to me. We have not lived together for many years now, and we see each other only at long intervals. It is as well that the subject has come up at once, for I have something to say that may prove painful to you. There are circumstances connected with the story which justify this deed in a measure, but the details of those matters we shall not go into." He paused for a moment, looking steadily into the girl's widely open eyes. "The society of which I am a member now never knew your mother, for we found it convenient to separate many years ago, shortly after you were born, in fact. So that when I began to be recognized by all these people I was alone, and it was impossible for me to speak of your mother and of you. I could not see then how things would eventually come about. Therefore, Joan, now that you have come home to me you will be known to

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my friends not as my daughter, but as my niece, Miss Howard."

To the last his tone was perfectly steady, and he seemed not to be looking at her, though in reality he studied her face intently. He felt it to be a disagreeable—nay, more than that, a miserable thing to say; for he could not tell her that he had never believed her his own child, and without that fact the story seemed cowardly enough. He waited anxiously for her to speak. Indeed, if she chose, my lady could make things very awkward.

At her father's words Joan rose suddenly, and then reseated herself. The angry blood stormed into her face, then left it again as pallid as before. When she could gain control of her voice, she said thickly:

"Why did you send for me to be a dishonor to you and to myself?"

"Were you happy in the convent, then?" he asked, conscience-stricken.

"No," she answered, with a sudden memory of her recent despair. "I wasn't happy—but I was not ashamed."

"Must you take it so, Joan? There is no shame about it. I wish that I could explain—no. That would do no good. So. I have told many of my friends already that my sister's daughter has been adopted by me, having just finished school. Now I will go to them and tell them that that was a slight mistake, that she is my daughter. That will be nearer the truth, and will, as you may perceive, materially alter the aspect of the case. We shall be instantly

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dropped, and shall have plenty of time on our hands for contemplation. Will that do, my dear?" Despite the sarcasm of his tone, Joan saw the reason of what he said, and replied instantly:

"Oh, no! that would be worse, of course. Being here I suppose I must accept the consequences and stay. Please do not think that I don't see your difficulty. I do, quite, only—" the next words distinctly, "I am afraid that I have not quite so much admiration for my famous father as I had before I left the convent into which I was put to be got out of the way."

Joan Howard had risen, and stood looking over at the bent figure yonder in the great leathern chair—Herbert Stagmar, the envied of millions, with his head in his hand, and his pride in the keeping of this child before him. Ah! the sin of Eve was visited upon Adam and his children, and his own folly returned to him increased a hundred fold.

Joan was astounded and deeply hurt, also very angry. This private history of her family was growing more seriously complicated than she had imagined it could be. Still her father—the man who sat over there—had called himself her father. He had been kind about it all, too. Would it better matters for her to be injured and unrelenting, like the Mother Abbess, when she had stolen half a dozen of the ripest peaches from the mother's favorite tree? Joan had a good deal of ordinary common-sense in her nature, and was at times happily prone to use it in lieu of certain finer but more unmanageable sentiments. Also, for her limited experience, she had rather a shrewd idea of human frailties. Therefore, after battling

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with her wrath for the space of three minutes, during which the man had not moved, she went closer, and stood just in front of him, watching how the light glinted over his brown hair and on the edge of his marble forehead. Then she said, sweetly:

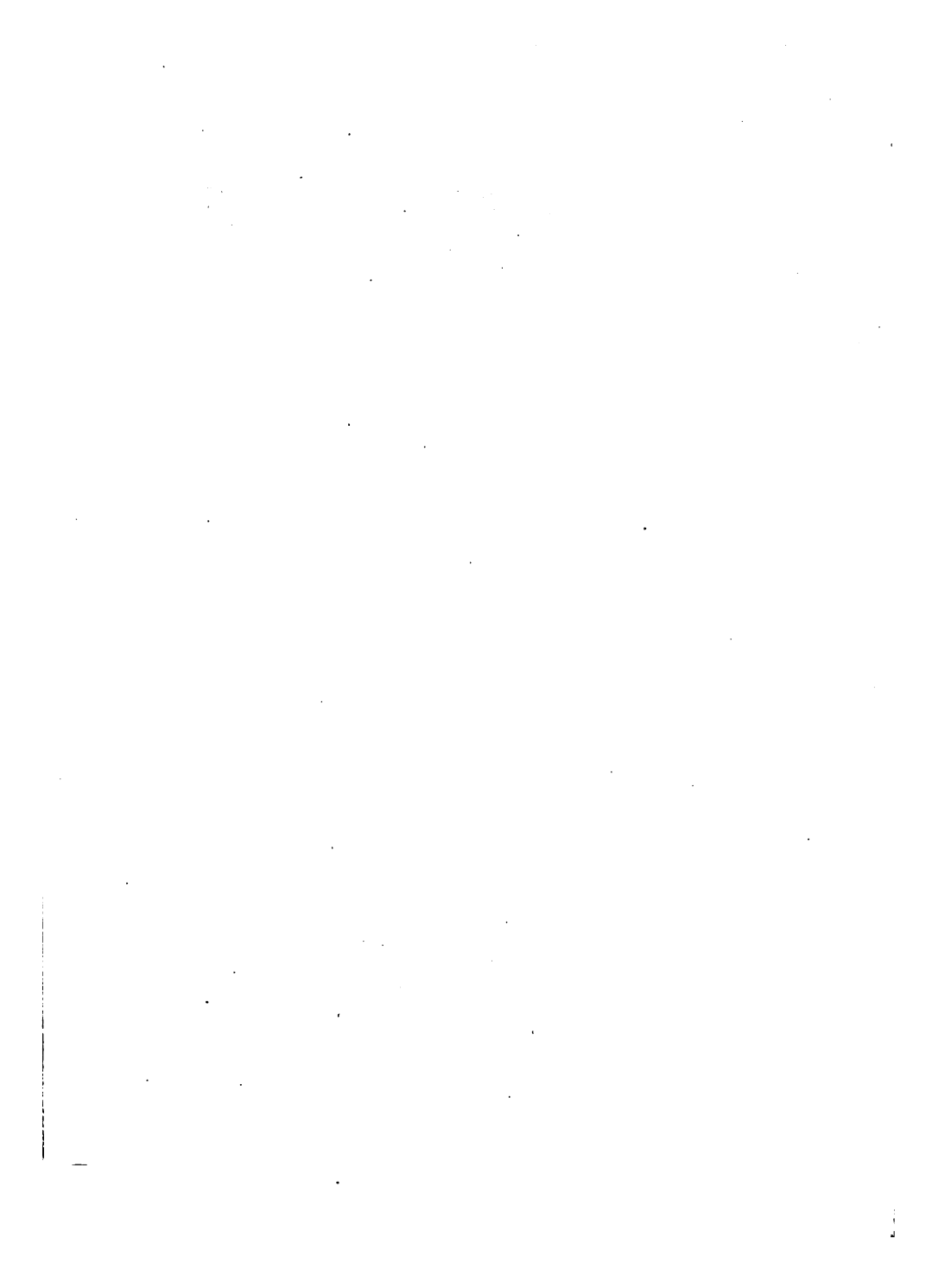
"Uncle—I will be tractable now."

Stagmar looked up, startled. "I'm your father, not your uncle," he exclaimed impulsively. Then, after a little pause, during which the girl looked at him curiously, he said with an evident effort:

"Reserve the 'uncle' for others, not for me. And you have been tractable enough. Good God, Joan! don't think that I don't credit you with a mind of your own. You owe no gratitude to Helen Howard and me for having brought you to earth. It is a poor place in the world that we have given you so far, and now I am adding another humiliation to the rest. In the world it's each man for himself, and truly you don't find much generosity in others, even of the nearest. In the old days I loved your mother—with a fool's love. Now I will give you what is mine to give. I can make puppets bow to you, I can give you stones and brilliant bits of cloth to make you shine before them all, and possibly win you a husband who will continue these blessings when I am gone into Night. Poof! what nonsense all this is. The room is hot. Come. Sit down here beside my desk, and we will be sensible, and talk over the arrangements for your winter. You have been very charitable to me, my dear. I thank you for it."

So the girl seated herself near her father, liking him well now, for he was a fascinating man in every





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way; and they talked quietly together until breakfast was announced. Nevertheless, they were too much alike to have become perfectly acquainted in one hour.

Mrs. Van Alyn was very good. It was but the third afternoon of Joan's first city week when she and her daughter, Mrs. Robert Courtenay, stopped their coupé before Stagmar's residence. Awkwardly enough for the convent-bred girl, her father was not in, and the call fell upon her own shoulders to sustain. Joan took the bits of pasteboard curiously, and with unconscious etiquette informed Carson that she would be down immediately. Stagmar had told her of the possibility of this lady's coming, also of her social position, and the girl did not think of refusing to see her. Nevertheless, her feet bore her very reluctantly down the broad stairs, and her hands grew cold and rather moist at the prospective ordeal of meeting two strange people, about whose ways of life she knew so little and was expected to know so much.

Mrs. Van Alyn was curious to see "Herbert's niece," as she called Miss Howard. The old lady was a firm friend of the author's, and did not permit herself to think of the glances, hints, and eyebrow shrugs that had been given upon the subject by certain people. Now these things were to be stopped, for where Mrs. Van Alyn called, others made all speed to follow. She had told her daughter where they were to go, and her daughter had mildly assented. Marie Van Alyn Courtenay was a very mild person in every way. She had married her husband because he had proposed to her, and because he had rather nice eyes, she thought. She rarely annoyed any one, never had

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an opinion of her own, and had been known to show some little talent in avoiding unpleasant subjects. She dressed faultlessly, and had no children.

The two ladies sat in the drawing-room, waiting. Mrs. Van Alyn expected the arrival of a small blonde girl, awkward beyond measure, and extremely shy. Her daughter was not thinking of their prospective hostess. She had nearly decided that the turquoise vase looked more effective in front of the peacock brocaded hanging than where it had formerly stood on the teak-wood stand. There was a light step in the hall, and a strong white hand pushed back the portière before the door. Joan entered the room, pale as usual, quiet, a little questioning smile upon her lips, her gray eyes regarding the ladies seriously. Mrs. Courtenay saw her mother rise, with some astonishment. Mrs. Van Alyn was not accustomed to rise for a young lady. Mrs. Robert stood beside the elder woman, bowed gracefully, and said something in a murmuring voice as Joan looked from one to the other in slight embarrassment.

"I am very glad indeed to see you. My uncle told me that you might perhaps come. It is very kind of you," she said, hesitatingly.

"It was no kindness, my dear, but a pleasure to me. Your uncle is my great friend, and I am but too happy to be the first to welcome his niece," responded Mrs. Van Alyn, graciously, and then the three were seated.

"This is a most charming afternoon for calls, Miss Howard. It is so charming to be having our Indian summer after all. I am hoping that we shall have

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several days of it. We were planning a drive to the Saddle and Cycle on Malcolm's drag if it lasts. They give charming dinners there. Were you at the theater last night? Sothern, you know. So charming!" Mrs. Courtenay paused, looking at Joan with her small head a little on one side, her most charming smile just curving her lips. She was pleased with the young girl, and thought her red hair—fascinating.

Joan was slightly amused. Was this a society woman, she wondered. To be sure she was lovely to look at, in her heavy, dove-gray silk, with its blue-green velvet and Irish lace, with the fluffy cape over her shoulders, and the infinitesimal bonnet-hat upon her daintily waved brown hair. Her little face was delicately cared for, her tiny brows prettily arched, and her forehead about as intellectual as her white lap dog's. But Joan had read that it was very difficult to be successful in society, and she felt slightly perplexed at this, its exponent. She was saved the trouble of answering the complex speech by a calm question from Mrs. Van Alyn, who was displeased with her daughter.

"Are you fond of riding and driving, Miss Howard?"

The girl's mind flew instantly back to the rare, free gallops that had been hers down that valley at home, through the nearest winding trails, or up, up the mountain-side, so high that her very soul cried out in triumph and stretched out its wings toward the faint blue of the distant Pacific that glittered laughingly at her through seventy miles of heaven's pure air. Therefore Joan's reply was brief, and her ready

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smile a little misted, but Mrs. Courtenay did not notice it.

"I suppose you rode sometimes, even at school, Miss Howard?"

"Sometimes, Mrs. Courtenay, yes."

"Mamma, we must take Miss Howard with us the next time Malcolm goes. I'm quite sure you would like the drag. It's so much more comfortable than most of them. Usually the backs of the seats are too low, and stick into one's spine, and the springs are frightful. But this is really a charming turnout."

Joan smiled and thanked her. She was losing her diffidence. Mrs. Van Alyn was pleased. Now, however, there came a pause in the fitful conversation. The elder lady was lost in contemplation of the young girl, and forgot to introduce a topic. Mrs. Courtenay felt her duty done in obtaining a new recruit for her brother's four-in-hand, and was examining a distant picture through a small, gold-mounted monocle; and poor Joan, feeling that she must speak, yet failing to conjure up anything rational to say, sat opening and shutting one cold hand miserably, and wondering how long her visitors would stay. It came as a great relief to her, and a desired pleasure to the others, when Carson at the door announced:

"Mr. Chatsworth and Mr. Stagmar."

Herbert and the artist had come in together, and made their way instantly to the drawing-room. The author had been disturbed at perceiving Mrs. Van Alyn's brougham at his door. He was anxious to know how Joan had managed without him. Horace had expostulated at the idea of meeting the ladies,

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but Stagmar would not hear of his hiding himself, and, so, perforce, with a rueful frown, the Bohemian submitted. Horace was not fond of tea and iced gossip at five in the afternoon, but there were not many things that he would have refused his friend just now, and besides that, like all the world, he was intensely curious to see Joan Howard.

"My dear Herbert, how do you do? So glad that we caught you."

Mrs. Courtenay smiled sweetly at the artist, and murmured her greetings to both gentlemen. Horace was presented to Joan, and immediately began talking to Mrs. Robert, while covertly examining the girl. Tea was brought and served elaborately by Carson, who was used to it, thus relieving Joan. She looked on in mild astonishment at the slices of lemon which went into each cup, and finally tasted the weak, warm, fashionable decoction with something akin to disgust. Was her father trying to economize on cream? The smile which rose at this thought was none the less puzzled, however. Stagmar watched her lips pucker and her eyes twinkle as she listened to the inanities which were being eyed out by the two beside her. Chatsworth was enjoying himself greatly and somewhat impolitely at the expense of the pretty little creature, who thought him wonderfully amiable. Mrs. Van Alyn talked quietly to Stagmar of his niece, and expressed so favorable an opinion in regard to her that the writer was highly pleased.

The call did not last much longer. Mrs. Van Alyn rose, putting down her cup and apologizing for a very long stay. "Really, you must forgive us. We have

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taken up half the afternoon. Marie, my dear,—Miss Howard, I am so glad to have seen you. Your uncle must bring you to us very soon."

"Good-by, Mr. Chatsworth; so awfully glad to have met you. Will you be at the Armand's to-night? Oh! so sorry! Mr. Stagmar, mamma has appropriated you so entirely that I am quite neglected. *Au revoir*, dear Miss Howard. You must certainly come with us on our next drive. Good-by!"

A tremendous rustle of silk, supplemented with a general murmur of adieu, grew gradually fainter in the hall outside, and then the outer door closed, and the ladies were gone. Joan's face was still soberly astonished, Chatsworth lay in a chair with an expression of quixotic relief on his face, and Stagmar came back shaking with suppressed laughter.

"Dear Horace," he said, in a light, running tone, with a perfect imitation of Mrs. Courtenay, "do come with me to my study, and, Miss Howard, would you not like to accompany us? I am going to unpack a picture which has just arrived. Charming, you know. You will be delighted with it, I assure you. Dear Horace is so clever! Oh, that is awfully good of you!"

Neither Joan nor the artist could help laughing; but the next instant Stagmar sobered completely. "Now, that was very rude of me," he said, half-humorously still. "I beg her pardon from here, but Mrs. Courtenay always has a peculiar effect upon my nerves. I must either laugh or cry when she goes, so I choose the least painful method of relief."

"Why should you want to cry?" asked Horace, idly.

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“I might not actually shed tears, but I should be forced to reflect what a farce all this that we pride ourselves so upon really is,” he answered, in rather a dry tone.

Joan felt more at ease now. Her father and this man were sensible, at least. “It all sounds so like a modern English novel,” she said, gayly; “I didn’t know that people did it in real life.”

“What novel were you thinking of?” her father asked, quietly.

“‘The Green Carnation.’”

Stagmar said no more, but shrugged his shoulders, and a little chill fell upon the other two at his evident displeasure.

Upon reaching the study they found the picture, which had been unpacked, lying in its folds of tissue paper upon a side table. The artist took it up and carried it over to the girl. “This is for you, from your uncle,” he said.

“For me? Oh! how good of him! Let me see it.”

Chatsworth removed the paper from his painting tenderly, and then held it up before her, watching her face anxiously. The picture showed the head and bust of a woman. A delicate, oval face, with narrow blue eyes, straight, short nose, full lips, and a stream of bright yellow hair that fell over her white shoulders, which were draped in folds of scarlet. The combination of color was striking, and the expression of the face indescribably strange. Joan looked at it for several moments, then asked in a low voice, “Who is it?”

“A picture of Mary Magdalene.”

“The Magdalene! Oh, surely the Magdalene was

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not like this! She was dark, with black hair, and great dark eyes, and pale lips, and she looked—not like this woman. How could this woman have repented? She is cold, feelingless, disagreeable. I hate the face! I shouldn't want it near me. Uncle—would you want the picture?"

Stagmar looked at his daughter in astonishment. She had spoken her thoughts unconsciously. Chatsworth flushed a little. Then the eyes of both men sought the picture again, and when they looked into each other's faces both showed that they had found in the features of paint what Joan Howard could not put into words. To the artist it had not occurred before.

"I am sorry, Miss Howard," he said, with his eyes on the floor. "I will set to work to-morrow on the face that you have described."

Joan started and looked at him in astonishment. "Did you paint that picture, Mr. Chatsworth? Oh, believe me, I didn't know it! I am so sorry for what I said! I had no idea that you were an artist."

Chatsworth smiled, still in a subdued manner. "I owe you nothing but gratitude," he said. "Our only true criticisms come to us in that way, and they are invaluable. I will take the picture back, Stagmar, and do another one for Miss Howard."

"Do another one for Miss Howard, by all means, Horace, but leave this one to me. I shall keep it for myself. It has an expression—" He did not finish the sentence, but turned hastily about to try the painting in a different light, and soon after that the artist left the house.

"MY NIECE, MISS HOWARD"

The next two weeks passed rapidly, and during them nothing happened of any import. Joan Howard had but few moments to herself, for she found that her metamorphosis from a country maid to a city débutante required everything but solitude. And those who had charge of Miss Howard during these days found her far more adaptable to their plans and ideas than many a girl born and bred to a city life. For Joan was as much the daughter of a beautiful woman as she was the child of a brilliant man, and there was in her a sufficient amount of fascination and vanity to have made her an abomination to womankind had it not been well tempered by some of her own good sense and a large portion of her father's thoughtfulness. As it was, the change in her was startling. It was almost impossible to believe that the perfectly possessed and graceful woman who could make every person in a room turn to look at her as she entered, and comment enviously upon the irreproachable simplicity of her perfect clothes, was the same Joan Howard who, two weeks before, had arrived in the great railway station of Chicago, and mistaken a footman for her father!

Ten days after Mrs. Van Alyn's call Stagmar sat alone in his study, staring up at Chatworth's Magdalene, and trying to fix his thoughts on the unfinished work before him. Stagmar had not done much work of late. That pallid face of the woman had seemed continually to stare down upon him, with such malignant mockery in her narrow eyes that he could not fix his mind upon anything else. The glance reminded him of his wife in her worst moods, yet held him

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spellbound even as she had done, so that he could not take the thing down. He was thinking again of his folly, of his possible fall in the eyes of the men whose admiration formed his object in life. As he had told his wife, it had come to be all he had, more than ever now that Joan, too, lived for it, as he saw. Since his wife's accident she had been always in his mind. The dread of exposure never left him. He feared society in these days. Before that rise of his, which he sometimes called his fall, he had feared nothing, living or dead. Now he was fettered, hampered on every side by the chains of his own forging. He no longer even stood alone. With him, whithersoever he went, another, and that other a woman, must go with him. He could not acknowledge Helen Howard, and neither would nor could he cast her off. With an involuntary brush of his hand over his head he seized a volume of Ibsen's plays which lay on his desk and began reading at random. He opened the book in the middle of the drama "Ghosts." The bit that he had half insensibly begun led into the intense scene where Mrs. Alving hears, as a frightful echo of the past, the clink of the champagne glasses struck now by son and daughter of her dead husband. The words struck their reader with an intolerable pain. He glanced sharply around toward the picture, but his eyes stopped, riveted, before they reached the pallidly gleaming face.

In the doorway before him Stagmar saw his wife. She stood with the half-light of deepening afternoon about her, her features in shadow, her figure appearing thinner than formerly, but still with all her clinging

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grace about her, and the delicate aroma from her clothes paralyzing his senses as of old. She was richly dressed in heavy sapphire blue trimmed with white satin and fur, and the glowing shades of her hair and her scarlet lips contrasted splendidly with the pearly tint of her skin. Stagmar leaped to his feet with a shuddering cry. His overwrought nerves could no longer be forced into quiet. The woman came forward quickly, in frightened surprise. In an instant he was back in his chair with Joan at his feet. He saw that it was not Helen, but even then the shock was not entirely dissipated. She was so like! so like! A little tremor ran over him, and he sat up with a slight laugh.

"Don't be frightened, Joan. I am simply not quite myself this afternoon. I haven't had much sleep lately. I'm right enough now. No, don't call any one; I need nothing."

"But you are ill, father, and you didn't tell me."

"I'm not ill, child. There, go now, and make your calls. I cannot go with you this afternoon. I have two weeks' unfinished work at hand here. Remember to leave my cards—it is a comfort to have some one to do it for me."

"Ah, father, I wish you wouldn't. 'Two weeks' work—why you are here alone for hours every day, working."

The man shook his head, and muttered almost unintelligibly, "I don't work; that's it."

Joan glanced at the clock, and then anxiously back at him, but he had caught the glance, and bade her go at once.

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"I have the victoria, to-day," she said, hesitatingly. "It is beautifully bright. Couldn't you come—"

"No, no. Good-by, and pleasant drive, my dear. Fifteen minutes only at Mrs. Van Alyn's, you know. And you might stop at Mrs. Courtenay's first, if you care to. She will undoubtedly be assisting her mother."

Joan smiled a little and went, looking back at the bowed figure as she passed through the door.

Rolling lazily down the boulevard in the crisp, bright autumn air, the girl's heart grew light. It suited her well, all this perfectly appointed luxury. She rubbed the finger of her glove down the wine-colored lining of the carriage, and looked thoughtfully at the streak of gray on the white kid. Square, towering residences of stone lined the street on either side, their crystal windows reflecting masses of red-gold light from the lowering sun. Joan watched them in quiet content. This was the sphere to which she belonged. The other, the convent, had only been bearable because she had never known anything different. Now, down the street and coming toward her she beheld someone whose face she knew well. Courtenay was strolling languidly up for his afternoon coffee at the club. Joan watched him intently, quite unconscious of the fixedness of her look. Presently, when the carriage was just abreast of the pedestrian, the man looked up and caught Joan Howard's eyes full upon him. He started visibly, cast a rapid look over the victoria, footman, coachman, the liveries, monograms on carriage and harness, then at the two or three ordinary people on the street, and slowly,

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with a still astounded air, raised his hand to his hat, and bowed to the bewildered girl. She made a half inclination of her head, from the very suddenness of the matter, and then drew herself angrily back, her cheeks reddening. Courtenay passed on without looking round. Not many yards farther up the street he encountered Kent out for his afternoon constitutional. The doctor greeted him cordially, but Courtenay took no heed of it.

“Jimmy,” he burst out, “Stagmar’s gone mad. Fancy! Not ten minutes ago I passed his victoria driving down the boulevard, and Jim, upon my soul, as I stand here, Helen Howard sat in it alone as calmly as though she—she was his wife.”

Kent stopped short, staring at him with his cheeks bloodless. “Good God, Bob! It isn’t possible! I left Helen Howard this morning in a high fever! Oh, Lord! is the man bound to ruin all of us! Tut! it’s not possible, I tell you. Why, Herbert, Herbert hardly knows—” Kent stopped, stuttering. The lie would not come, but he had done his best.

The upshot of it was that as soon as Courtenay could be got rid of the doctor made all haste to the house of his friend. It was evident that Stagmar was not to spend the afternoon in peace.

CHAPTER VI

ELEANOR FELTON.

The writer had succeeded in throwing his mind off of ordinary things, and had forced down a page of strained sentences for his most necessary article, when the angry voice of Kent outside the study door came to his ears.

"Well, then, Carson, if you 'cannot intrude upon Mr. Stagmar while at work,' I will."

Forthwith, ignoring the continued protestations of the butler, Doctor Jim, his little face still pale, but his eyes glowing angrily, entered the room and slammed the door behind him. Stagmar's back was toward him, and the writer did not move a hair's breadth. For a moment the faint scratch of the pen was the only sound in the room. But the little doctor was very serious this time. He set his hat and his small morocco medicine-case down upon the table vigorously, and then said, shortly, in a deep, growling tone:

"Herbert!"

The man at the desk laid down his pen, sat for a moment as if listening, then turned very slowly about until he faced the speaker. His face was cold, his eyes half-closed and dull, for Stagmar was thoroughly angry.

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"Be so good as to state what you have come for, if you have actually any warrant for this intrusion."

"Warrant enough. Don't worry. I'm going directly, and it's very possible that you'll never be intruded on again. I can't afford to lose what little position I've gained in the last few years, even for the satisfaction of still knowing you, Herbert Stagmar."

"What do you mean? Don't wander, please."

"By heaven! you don't act as though you were mad. But how shall I believe anything else when you permit a woman like Helen Howard to drive through the streets of our city alone in your victoria, attended by your servants, and drawn by your horses? The woman is your wife, but—are you going to publish that fact, my prudent friend?"

During his speech the angry doctor had backed to the door, and now stood with his hand on the knob, enjoying the varying expression of Stagmar's face.

The writer took a quick step forward, then held up his hand to prevent the door's being opened, and said in a low tone:

"What are you talking of? Who told you that stuff?"

"Courtenay—"

Of a sudden Stagmar repeated his glance toward the painted Magdalene of the yellow hair. He drew a breath, and then laughed shortly, a laugh that had no mirth in it. "I know," he said, calmly. "Courtenay was mistaken. It was daughter, not wife—my niece, you know, Kent. It was a curious fate that gave them faces so differently alike."

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Kent stared hard at his friend, and his mouth opened and shut again rapidly. Then the writer's mood changed. He seized the doctor by both shoulders and drew him back into the middle of the room, scanning his odd little face with fierce intensity, hoping vainly to find within it some coveted thought.

"Jim, old Jim," the deep voice quivered strangely, "is that old boy-folly of mine to cost me everything that I have won here in the world by my long slavery?"

Kent's temperament was eminently matter-of-fact, but he could still be moved by this unpleasant condition of the affairs of one for whom he really felt a deep affection. To the apparent appeal in those last words, however, he could but answer, heavily:

"I don't know, Herbert, really, I don't know. I never could understand how you ever did this last thing. But it's done, now, and the Lord knows how it'll turn out. My advice is, introduce her as quickly as you can. Don't hesitate. The more calmly you take her, the easier everybody else will fall to you. I don't believe the fellows would tell, and the ladies certainly oughtn't to know anything. But an accident is always possible. I don't know, Herbert; really, I don't know."

The doctor finished drearily, having arrived at no particular conclusion, and Stagmar stood for a moment looking at him with a half-smile. Then he made a sudden gesture.

"Courtenay may be gossiping at the club by this time, Jim. For the sake of old days, go and head

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him off for me if you can. I'll bring Joan out as soon as possible; meantime Mrs. Van Alyn has taken her up. Don't fret over it. Just stand by me when you have the opportunity. I'll come to the club to-night."

"Good-by, then, old man. I'll do what I can for you, count on me for that. You have forgotten the intrusion now, I trust?"

"Not a word of that, Kent. I was in a temper. Good-by. Bless you."

Kent was gone, and the workman alone again. The thread of his thought was broken. For a moment he stood at his desk, whistling a bar or two, and looking down at the scribbled sheets. He laid one hand lightly on them, and remarked, earnestly:

"To be able to portray the living, suffering, longing, loving, rejoicing, and despairing of others for others, the life of the creator of imaginary people must be commonplace. It is impossible to write when the mind is busied with twisting out plots and counterplots for the living people whom one meets on the stage of actuality. I am getting so that I act for the sake of the curtain-calls. It is a bad plan, for some day those calls will cease, and then, oh, Stagmar! where art thou? Relegated to a minor part, without a playable scene in the last drama of life!

"Heigho! I grow despondent. I shall go to Eleanor Felton, and tell her at last all that I have kept so neatly hidden under my own hair until now. It will be a pity to make her illusions vanish into air, and yet I am curious as to how she will take it all."

So with a shrug of the shoulders, a banging down of his desk cover, and a half-mocking glance at his

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picture, Herbert Stagmar disappeared from his study.

An hour later the writer was informed that Miss Felton was at home, and that though it was not her day, would be glad to see him. Would he be seated in the reception-room? She would be there immediately.

Miss Felton's house, which she herself had planned, was small, thoroughly artistic, and perfectly comfortable. Stagmar knew every inch of the first floor, and had, first and last, spent nearly a quarter as much time in this little place as in his own home. He was gazing absently at the symmetrical pattern of the Moorish hangings in the little ante-room, when his hostess entered.

Eleanor Felton was never a striking figure, and frequently, as to-day, she looked actually insignificant. She was dressed in a tightly fitting and perfectly plain black gown, with her thin hair thrown straight back from her face, her one redeeming feature a strong, sensitive mouth. Nevertheless, no one would have denied her an interesting personality, and some would have confessed that she possessed an unusual amount of personal magnetism. Two people more perfectly suited for occasional intercourse, and more absolutely unsuited for continuous companionship than Herbert Stagmar and Eleanor Felton cannot be imagined. Through periodic comradeship the character of each had become readable to the other; but had the study of an hour become the lesson of a lifetime the result would have been weariness and constant irritation. This latter point both had come to understand better than any outsider.

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"I am glad that you have come at last, Herbert. I had begun to believe myself deserted. I am anxious to hear the sound of your voice again. Come to my den. We shall be disturbed here."

Stagmar barely smiled at the cordiality of her greeting, and looked over her face with serious eyes as he rose and followed her into the disorderly little place, where they had already spent many a brilliant hour together. When they had entered the room he threw himself at once into his usual chair, while his companion walked up and down once or twice, a little restlessly. He watched her in silence until she sank upon the couch in the corner, where she had the light on his face, her own being in shadow.

"Now you may speak," she said, looking at him intently, with a strained note in her low voice.

"Yes, now," he repeated, leaning his head wearily on his right hand. "I am going back to Genesis, to-day, Eleanor. You shall hear the story of the rising of a man's star, and the beginning of its fall. You have never heard all of it before. It isn't Ibsen or Sudermann, but it is none the less realism, and so in your line of study. Now to begin.

"Forty years and three months ago, down in perhaps the filthiest slum of this same city a boy was born. His father was not much more than a boy, his mother was almost an old woman. The boy was of good blood on his father's side, and from that parent came the money allowance, scanty enough, which enabled the mother to purchase the babe's first rags. The child suffered; it was born to that; but it lived. It had come to earth to stay, and refused to be forced

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off again. At the age of two years the boy was earning more than three-fourths of its living by careful supervision of the gutters, and the hiding places where dogs deposited newly-stolen bones. At three he had become self-supporting, and a month or so after this joyous anniversary he was left alone, for his mother, together with his father's allowance, disappeared. The child took this questionable loss philosophically. His mother's temper had not been at all times equable, and the muscles in her arms had become highly developed. This boy became a child of the people, and the streets which he knew so well made him a satisfactory and roomy home. For two or three years he accepted his heritage with equanimity, and made no attempt to change a position which he thought might have been made vastly worse. It was as a 'gutter-snipe,' then, that he gained his first lasting impressions of the lives of mankind. There was the population of a great city revolving about him, and from his points of vantage he beheld each type of society, from the lowest, his own class, to the highest, of which even then he had begun to dream, vaguely. By bits the child obtained a smattering of book-knowledge. Scrap by scrap he learned to read, from sign-boards, concerning which he was curious. From the outset this science of marks interested him, and with the first cast-off novel that he found and labored through, the world, his world, was changed for him. The writer's instinct had been born in him. From the beginning he thought of and criticised what he read. He wondered why certain sentences were awkwardly put together, and why such fearful dilemmas

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were so unnaturally introduced. Later, after a long course of dime novels and acute observation, he began to wonder over the dilemmas themselves. In real life, even of the melodramatic classes, men and women were drugged only through their own desire; there were villains in plenty, but their crimes were for paltry and obvious reasons; people rarely committed suicide, and then never for despairing love, and the chivalrous heroes and supernaturally beautiful heroines were mournfully absent members of ordinary society. I can remember vividly the day when the boy opened his eyes indignantly and flung his yellow book to the ground. 'It ain't true. Such things don't happen, and I know it. The men that write about 'em are lyin'. I'm sick of the lot of 'em. Why can't they write the truth?'

"For a time the boy gave up reading, and in the hours when he was not at work applied himself to other things. He had become a printer's devil, and he lived royally upon two dollars a week. Think, Eleanor, something less than thirty cents a day, and he was never invited out to dine, in those times.

"The boy worked, and the boy dreamed. Strange, far-off dreams were his, of men who had gone before and left their names on the roll of Time, which he read nowadays and called history. His unanswered question was whether lives like those were possible now, and his unspoken hope that they were. The War of the Rebellion had ended seven years before. He was thirteen now, a wild, unsociable lad. His comrades hated him doubtless, but they dared not show it, for his temper was quick, and his body strong and under-

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fed. In the newspaper office where he worked he saw a certain range of ascent before him. To be editor of a daily was a certain kind of greatness. It gave much power and personal authority, and those were always adjuncts of his dim ideal. He heard Horace Greeley's name spoken with respect by every flippant column-a-day man on the staff. That realization might be sufficient if he ever attained to it—and he had never a doubt of his ability, for he was not afraid of work. Then, after he had been called upon to do the assistant editor's work every night for a couple of months during his chief's vacation, that vision vanished and crumbled away like the thoughts which go when the music stops.

"Finally a volume of 'Pendennis' fell into his outstretched hands, and one member of the human race had found the work he was to do. From that moment an understanding of his talent came to him, and for the first time he put his pen to paper with a definite purpose.

"Then came the great fire which destroyed the boy's city, and afterward he aided in rebuilding it. The little halt helped on the development of his views, for during the days of desolation the better depths of men's natures gave out their kindly contents, and the budding pessimist stood astounded at the revelation. Ah, how much easier are the great calamities to bear than the pin-pricks of life! During all his youth the boy studied, worked, thought, and grew in all ways; and finally, when he stood upon the verge of manhood he began to play. It is a grave mistake to take the early years seriously. The reaction is infinitely more

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tremendous when it is suddenly discovered that all around on every hand roll rivers of unknown and untold pleasures, to realize that with one short plunge you have escaped the dry, dusty, honest world, and lie floating in those cool, shimmering, illusive shallows.

"The young man found these things. He had a few friends—not many; a young doctor, an artist already married and father of a son, and half-a-dozen fellow-reporters who worked on his paper. He had begun to make some little name for himself among newspaper men. But his heart burned and his fancy flew out beyond that, to greater days. He wrote stories, books, plays, essays, had them rejected by publishers, good-naturedly grieved by friends, and burned by himself. But he kept on, for he was bound in honor to himself to stick to his chosen work.

"Nevertheless, he began to play." Here Herbert Stagmar stopped speaking for a moment and glanced for the first time at his listener. Miss Felton's eyes were still thoughtfully upon him.

"Go on, Herbert. I am interested."

Stagmar picked up a trinket from the table, which he fingered nervously, and then, a frown between his brows, and his eyes on the floor, went on.

"He did what other men do; drank, gambled, wasted money, even threw it away, but without running into debt. He went without fires to pay for his wine, and he—he wrote tracts in order to take his place at the pool-table." Eleanor laughed a little.

"And finally, in the course of time, he met a woman—a wonderful, glorious woman she was in

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those days, Eleanor. And he loved her. Others—many others—had loved her, and she had laughed their love into mighty flames. But my passion for her was more than theirs. It changed my life, sobered it, made me think again. The doctor and the artist laughed, but I ordered some coal, and cast the empty bottles out of my window.” All unconsciously Stagmar had fallen into the first person, for these memories were powerful things, and his listener gave no sign.

“One afternoon, late, after my work at the office was done, I went to the house where Helen lived, and offered her marriage, support, a home. She was astonished, glad I think. She cried, I remember, and then laughed, in the same way, and—and refused. She said—she loved—the old—life—best.”

Herbert Stagmar’s head drooped into his hands, and the last word was barely intelligible. Eleanor scarcely breathed, but her eyes were dim as she looked at the bowed head of the man she could have loved. A pause of a long minute, and his voice rose again on the silence.

“I went back alone to my den, and what an evening that was that I spent I shall never forget. Kent came, and Chatsworth with him, and I sent them both away. I couldn’t bear their talking, yet I hated to stay with my own thoughts. I sat and watched my candle burn away and longed to go out into oblivion with it. Then Eleanor—then she came. Helen herself came to me. She knelt outside my door and listened and called my name, softly. I went to her and lifted her up—poor girl!—poor girl! I

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kissed her once when she went, and gave her my coat to wear over her shoulders, for she was not warmly dressed. What I did during the rest of that night I can scarcely remember. I was like a madman. I saw Kent and the artist, I know, and they laughed with me, thinking that my craze would pass with the darkness. But it did not. The next day they were both with me when Helen—Howard and I were married."

"Good heavens!"

The sharply agonized exclamation roused Herbert Stagmar from his mood of quiet reminiscence. He looked up at the figure of the woman standing before him. "Yes, Eleanor," he answered, still in his low, even tone, "that is what I came to tell you. Let me finish the—story."

Miss Felton seated herself blindly, and continued to stare into his face, unconscious of her expression of horror. Stagmar went on.

"Helen Howard was a Roman Catholic, and a peculiarly devout one. I had neither reason nor desire for her to give up her religion, for at that time I was of no acknowledged creed. Upon our wedding day, therefore, I was received into the church by the same priest that married us. I was deeply enough in earnest at the time to insist upon a civil as well as religious ceremony. The knot which bound us was well tied, you perceive. So I took her to the home that I had made for myself. Here in two rooms we lived, happily, for three months, contentedly for three more. During this time my first successful book was published. 'Destiny' I called it. I see a

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copy in the case there now. I could not easily forget the day when I held the first volume—damp from the press, its fresh, uncut leaves smelling sweeter to me than any perfume—close to my heart. Ay, and we laughed, and feasted, and drank together, Kent, and the artist, and Helen, and I! Good friends, they were, and generous hearted as men could be. Poor old Chatsworth! He died not long after, leaving Horace, a child then, and a disagreeable wife behind him.

"My book sold well, but my profits were small. Publishers do not love young authors, and the beginning is always slow. Helen was not satisfied with the receipts, and finally made me, who was careless enough about money then, think myself unjustly treated. We talked about it a good deal, and not very good-naturedly toward the last. Finally, one day she told me that if I couldn't make money in one way, I must in another. She advised me to speculate, and brought out what little we had saved for a beginning. Within the fortnight I had lost it all, laughed about it, and went back to my desk and my dreams.

"After another three months of that life together, Helen grew bored. I partially returned to the old life with my companions, for I could stand tears, and silence, and fits of anger no better than other men. Helen was tired of me and our monotonous life. I might have foreseen the end, but I was twenty-three, fond of my wife, and light-hearted at that. It was all over one day. She had not been true, I thought. In her fury with me she let me think what I chose. Joan had come to us then. Nevertheless, in spite of her, by mutual agreement we separated. The baby was

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sent into a convent, where she grew up; Helen went on the stage as a dancer—she had genius for that sort of thing, and I lived on alone again with my ambition, and with Kent.

“Helen and I were well married. Mother Church would see to it that it should be difficult for us to be divorced. All things considered, it might not have been impossible, but you know the Roman Catholic law on that point and its stringency. At any rate I did not care to try, and never have, for I abhor publicity. From that day to this I have watched her, my wife, from a distance, and I have seen her but four or five times during this seventeen years.

“My rise came gradually and surely. After that first disastrous attempt I speculated often, and with unusual success, perhaps because I was careless about the loss. It was the excitement that I wanted. My writing also came to bring me in something of an income. Kent climbed up with me, and finally married Louise Brent in triumph. Her position in society naturally assured him success, and as I had been groomsman at his wedding, I was well received at their house. Kent and the priest alone knew of the marriage with her who is still my wife. You are the third outsider to be told, and in all probability the last. Recent circumstances have brought my daughter into my house, and though I could not acknowledge her as my child, I have adopted her as niece, and she is the same to me as though I had permitted her to bear my name.

“There you have the story of the folly that has spoiled a life. I came to tell it to you to-day because

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it is almost impossible for me to keep it to myself any longer, and also because I wanted to know what you, the most sensible of women, think of it. Now do you thoroughly comprehend what all this means, Eleanor? How, notwithstanding my measureless ambitions and my capacity for the slavery that they require, a perfect self-success has been always beyond my grasp? I have had to live with the knowledge that my early life must be concealed. I am bound, through my own act; bound for this life, which I believe the only life, to a woman who has been born and reared among the lowly, surrounded by the last type of humanity, who absorbed, easily and naturally, all the ways of her fellows. I have had to realize from the beginning that my career could never reach the heights that I could see above me. A woman's jealousy—that of such a woman as Helen Howard—is a thing that cannot be set aside. Before we parted she showed me my road, and religiously I have followed it. At first my pleasure in the new life I led gratified me, but of late years it has grown continually duller, until now I begin to ache with the weariness of keeping on in the middle of the dusty road, in the full glare of the sun and the choke of the dust. Beside me, on either hand, I can see well-earned, shady lanes that wander on through cool, hidden depths—but they are out of her sight, and so lost to me. Always I have avoided scandal; but sometime why may I not proclaim the story from the housetops, listen a little to the taunts of men, and then go plunge away from the confusion of Time into the calm oblivion of Eternity?"

Some emotion had crept into the last fantastic sen-

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tence that the author spoke, and when it was said both man and woman were silent for a time, thinking. Finally, Eleanor, who had not raised her head since that one exclamation, looked up and into his face.

"Shall I tell you what I think of your story?"

"It is what I told it for."

"I cannot say precisely why, but it strikes me as the recital of rather a cowardly life."

For a little Stagmar said nothing; then he rose and slowly held out his hand. With a second's hesitation she took it, and the firm clasp brightened her eyes a little. "I agree with you, Eleanor. It is true. And yet—and yet you didn't live through it all. I thank you for your judgment. Do you know of a penalty?"

Miss Felton wearily shook her head. "I pay the penalty. My idol is fallen, and you have hacked it to pieces. Some day, Her—Herbert, I can come to regard you contentedly as I do the rest of the world. Just now, I can't. Nevertheless, I am grateful for your confidence. It was a strange story, and like you. And after all, you did—nothing wrong. You were better than many might have been. I will think of it. Good-by."

"Good-by, Eleanor."

Stagmar could find nothing more to say, and so, with mingled emotions, among which relief perhaps predominated, he left the house and his friend, but not, as he had feared, his friendship. No. Despite the bitterness of her words and eyes, he knew that his confidence had only added another layer of cement to the strong tower of their mutual sympathy. But not so would it be with all.

CHAPTER VII.

JOAN HOWARD'S DEBUT.

On the evening of the twenty-second of November Stagmar was to introduce his daughter-niece formally to Chicago society. He had asked perhaps three hundred people to his house, among them most of the talented men of the city—artists, musicians, and literati—among whom Stagmar himself was recognized as leader, there to gladden their souls and cheer their brains with all the wit, wisdom, wickedness, folly, and champagne that could be endured in one night; and also, as the primary object of their coming, to present to them the last acquisition of his establishment, the prospective companion of his declining years, as he whimsically had put it to Joan herself.

Miss Howard was not nervous over the momentous affair, for extreme self-consciousness was not one of her characteristics, neither could the adjective shy be applied to her now. Her costume was in very good taste, and very expensive, and when she was dressed, at an hour somewhat early, she dismissed her maid and remained for a few moments in her room, having intended to devote herself for a quarter of an hour to serious meditation. But Joan was human, and concentration upon serious subjects is well-nigh impossible at such a time. Most of her fifteen minutes

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passed rapidly in a retrospection of the incident of a week ago when Robert Courtenay had bowed to her. She had dreamed rather more than she would have confessed over the face of the man whose photograph stood in her uncle's study, and now she wondered with unprofitable curiosity as to whether she would meet him—perhaps to-night.

At half-past eight she gathered up her delicate, misty skirts and slowly descended the oaken staircase. Her father was not in the hall, nor was he in the softly-lighted drawing-rooms. "In his study," she thought, and went there to find him. But that great room, with its dark, carved panelings and deep red walls, was empty, too. It was lighted only by a small electric lamp standing on top of the low, broad mantelpiece. Against this lamp, with the red light glowing down upon its face, stood the picture of Courtenay.

The girl threw open the heavy door and entered quietly. A lazy slumbrous odor of incense hung pleasantly through the room. Stagmar had been writing an ecclesiastical story that day, and left this trace of his theme behind him. It struck a chord of memory in Joan's heart, and she stood looking dreamily about her, forgetful of the object of her coming. Her eyes encountered those of the photograph, and she moved slowly toward it, never looking away from that face, which seemed interwoven with her destiny in this new life. Almost reverently she took up the picture, studying the strong, egotistical features until they had so burned themselves into her mind during that ten minutes that never again, so

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long as she lived, did Joan Howard find herself unable to call them up before her, even to the drooping black lashes that shaded the changeable eyes. Here, as she stood alone in a great man's workroom, under the malignant gaze of the pallid Magdalene over the desk yonder, the germ of the first, the greatest, and the only real love that the girl's strange heart ever knew was conceived—and behold! Joan Howard was a girl no longer, but a woman. She stood quite still, her thoughts wandering now, when she felt the door open, and knew that Stagmar's eyes were on her. Hastily and unperceived she dropped the photograph upon the floor at her feet, as it might have fallen, and turned to him.

"I have been looking for you, Joan. It is time that you were in the drawing-room. Mrs. Van Alyn has just gone upstairs." His tone was slightly severe, for he was not fond of finding others alone in his sanctum. Joan knew this, and only answered quietly as they left the room:

"I had been looking for you, and then forgot what I went to the study for. I am growing absent-minded."

Stagmar laughed and kissed her hand caressingly as he motioned to Carson, who brought forward a great, showery bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley, mingled with clusters of heavy purple orchids, tied with long ends of ribbon of the same colors. Joan could say nothing in admiration, but the somewhat blasé author smiled with satisfaction at the light in her eyes as he turned to greet Mrs. Van Alyn, who had been gracious enough to assist them in receiving. When

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her husband descended he also bore a massive bouquet for the débutante—this one of Duchess of Albany roses and feathery maidenhair.

Bromler Van Alyn had not met Stagmar's niece, and after the presentation, which Joan sustained with absolute grace, the older man stepped aside to his host in complete admiration.

"I must have met a couple of thousand of them at least," said Van Alyn, "but, by the Lord, Stagmar, I never saw one like that! She's got that something about her that Mesmer called magnetism and Edison calls electricity, and Brother Snippington might call—the devil, but which, whatever it is, is going to set her on her feet straight from the outset, from to-night till the day when she throws herself away on some fool as they all do."

Bromler Van Alyn had in all probability never made a speech like that about any woman before, and it was a strong feeling that had made him utter it now. Stagmar was not pleased with the sentiment it conveyed. Nay, old memories were too strong for that. Upon his face was a frown as he went forward.

"Good-evening, doctor. So charmed, Mrs. Kent—you and Miss Edith have not yet met my niece, I believe? Allow me to present Miss Howard."

As her father spoke Joan bowed obediently, and then looked curiously at the tall, slender figure and classic face of the young lady before her. She felt an instant admiration for, and also an unexplainable dread of Edith Kent. Edith, on the contrary, swiftly and critically examined her new acquaintance, found her lacking in neither breeding nor taste, murmured

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a few exceptionally cordial words, and passed on. Mrs. Kent, after some polite and pointless observations, crossed over to her host, anxious to bore him with a new anecdote, and also wishing to have her face toward Miss Howard, with whom she had been impressed, wondering whether it was her serious manner, the occasional brilliant half-smile, or the series of rapid and unstudied expressions which played over her face which produced that peculiar fascination which even she could feel.

Stagmar had been caught and held by three or four people, and for the moment had turned from Mrs. Van Alyn's side. During a slight pause in his conversation he caught the sound of her voice, saying cordially:

"Ah, Miss Felton! Good evening! We had hoped for you earlier. Let me present to you Miss Howard, Herbert's niece."

The author could not restrain a swift glance over his shoulder. He was just in time to catch Eleanor's look of surprised admiration as she bowed and spoke a few earnest words in her quiet manner; and then he turned away again to Kent until she should come up to him.

Miss Felton's mind had not been easy since the last time that she had seen Stagmar. She felt that she had judged him too severely, and was intensely anxious to speak with him again on the subject of his daughter, and also, if possible, his wife. She dressed herself more carefully than usual this evening, and, having encased herself in an unassailable armor of self-possession, went forth to satisfy her curiosity in

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regard to the débutante. Upon her entrance to the drawing-room it needed all her nonchalance to keep her from an exclamation at sight of the beauty of Joan Howard. Stagmar had seen the only sign that her astonishment had given, of which fact she was ignorant. She passed on, with her temples throbbing a little, and silently held out her hand to the master of the house.

"Good evening, Miss Felton—?" came his steady tones, the phrase marked slightly by the rising inflection toward the end.

"Is it good evening to me?" she asked, rather indistinctly.

"I beg your pardon," he said, bending his head toward her.

"Oh, no! I beg yours. I really came to do it. I have forgiven you more than ever now—since I saw Joan."

"Thank you. You have lifted a weight from me. I will speak with you a little later, when there is less of a crowd."

Eleanor smiled and passed on, content with what had already been said.

In the meantime Doctor Kent and young Callowell Garth, their eyes fixed alternately upon Bromler Van Alyn and the door, were talking together with great soberness.

"He ought to come, Kent. Be so deucedly pointed if he didn't, ye know. Stagmar's irreproachable, of course—oh, no need to look at me. I know him as well as you, almost. Bob was certainly dead broke, though, now, wasn't he, ol' chap?"

"He was," agreed the doctor, solemnly. "He

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most certainly was. He's lost well onto twenty thousand in the last three nights, I know. Stagmar wanted to stop toward the last, but Courtenay wouldn't have it. He was crazy, stark crazy."

"Whatever was it started them?"

"Couldn't say, exactly. I believe it was some sort of wager, the best two nights out of three. And they played all night."

"Oh, but do you recollect the size of those pots, dear boy! Why, if I'd been in with 'em myself I'd have gone home dead drunk every night, so I would, by Jove! I wilted three collars just looking it over for a couple of hours on Wednesday, by the Lord I did, Jimmy!"

Kent laughed softly, adding, "Well, Bob was drunk enough the last two evenings, I should judge." And then they continued to watch the door.

From the foregoing conversation it is not difficult to gather that more than one person in those rooms was awaiting the advent of Robert Courtenay with curiosity that night. Perhaps no one of the dozen men there who, including Stagmar himself, were anxiously awaiting for the proof of a man's pride, looked forward to his coming with half the anticipation that Joan, with all her uncertainty, indulged in. It was growing rather late now for more arrivals. The large rooms were filled. And still the débutante scanned each new face with curiosity and chagrin. The influx of guests diminished continually, and Mrs. Van Alyn turned frequently for a moment from the young girl's side. She was speaking now with a ponderous professor of sciences from the university, and

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Joan, left to herself, began studying the orchids of her first bouquet. Suddenly Mrs. Courtenay's colorless tones made her look up.

"Good evening, Miss Howard! I do not have to be introduced by mamma, do I, you tired girl? How charming everything is, is it not? I have come down in advance of my husband, but I must wait and present him to you myself, I think. He is always charming to young girls."

Of the extent of this charm Mrs. Courtenay was happily unaware. However, Joan was quite ignorant of Courtenay's identity at that time, and the remarks made little impression upon her. In a moment she perceived Marie nodding and smiling as she murmured, "Ah! there he is." The girl turned politely and looked up the stairway. Instantly there flew to her cheeks one swift rush of scarlet, then the color drew away, leaving her face pallid. She stood with her hands shaking a little, and her heart pounding fiercely. By the time the monotonous words, "Miss Howard, allow me to present," fell on her ears, she was collected enough to bow slightly. Then, raising her head, she felt herself looking for one long moment down into a pair of baffling gray-green eyes shaded by heavy dark lashes. Not a word was spoken. He was gone, his wife leaning gracefully upon his left arm, her gown of pale turquoise velvet clinging in serpentine folds about her perfectly trained figure. Joan looked after them, as they made their way through the throng, bowing here, speaking there, pausing again, everyone greeting them with eagerness, until they had passed from her sight in the throng.

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The girl's eyes burned. So it was over. He was married. She had not thought of that before, but certainly it was the most natural thing in the world. Of course—he was married. She threw her head back for a second as her father came up to her saying that she need stand there no longer. He wished her to come with him now to meet and talk with an old friend of his. Miss Howard found herself upon a small sofa in a corner with Eleanor Felton beside her and her father gone to bring her fan. No one whom she knew was near her, and Courtenay was out of sight, as was proper. What, then, made her so nervous? Why should she be looking about out of her aching eyes at every object within her range of vision? Why was it impossible for her to keep her fingers still? Eleanor watched her loftily, feeling that she was untrained. Joan wondered why this lady beside her could not speak, and then judged her to be of—his wife's type. She was astonished at her father. It was some moments before her astonishment was abated. She had finally looked up into the strong, plain, severe face of Miss Felton, and thought with a start how incongruously it appeared, rising above the rose-colored moiré and point de Burano which the elder woman wore.

When Joan turned, Eleanor spoke. The sentence was sufficient to drive all vagrant thoughts out of her head.

"You are fond of your father?" she asked, quietly.

The girl caught her breath. "My f—ather?" she faltered.

"I have known Mr. Stagmar for a long time, inti-

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mately, Joan," the older woman went on, "and he has been good enough to tell me your real relationship to him. Of course, before others I do not speak of him as anything but your uncle. But I wanted you to know that I understand, for I am anxious to be a friend to you as well as to him. And in truth, my dear, there are many things in which I might be of use to you. Your position here is rather a difficult one, and mine is absolutely assured. I am permitted many eccentricities, and indeed I need the permission. Do you think that you can come to like me?"

Eleanor's odd frankness was infectious. Joan fell at once into the spirit of her manner.

"I like you already," she said, smiling. "You make me feel at home with you, and these other people do not."

"Of course not. It is their great object in life to impress people with their exclusiveness and their vast superiority. It would never do for them to let themselves be found out easily."

Joan looked at her for a moment in serious silence. Then she said, almost panting for breath apparently: "It is very warm here, is it not? The odor of the flowers makes me ill."

Then it was that Eleanor Felton discovered her mistake. She had unwittingly been talking with a would-be one of "these people." Oh, alack-a-day! And Stagmar's daughter!

"My dear Joan," came a gentle voice at that young lady's right hand. Joan turned about immediately to Mrs. Van Alyn, who was beside her, and behind whom stood a tall, broad-shouldered young fellow, with

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pleasant face, large eyes, and brown waving hair. Joan liked his face at first sight.

"Miss Howard, this is Malcolm, my son. His arrival is unpardonably late, but for all that I could not punish him by not bringing him up to present to you."

The admiration in Malcolm's eyes was very palpable as he answered, smilingly: "Miss Howard, they did not tell me what a reward was held out to early comers, or I can assure you that I should never have wasted so precious an hour in an artist's den."

The position was embarrassing to Joan, who was not used to young men, nor to such speeches. Eleanor Felton rose, however, and after patting Malcolm's shoulder whimsically, moved slowly off with Mrs. Van Alyn, leaving the two young people together, to Malcolm's satisfaction. Joan, too, was not displeased, for she had a feminine liking for a good-looking man and something of her mother's adaptability to their manners.

Malcolm was not often at a loss with a young lady, and certainly not so at the side of the most beautiful girl whom he had met for many a day. His start was excellent. Pulling a small, light fan from the mystery of some one of his pockets, he asked if its services would be acceptable.

Joan thanked him, smiling. "Do you always carry a fan with you for humanity's sake? You cannot imagine what a relief this is to me. The air is suffocating."

"You look pale, Miss Howard. Wouldn't you like an ice, or a glass of champagne, or something cool?"

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"Oh, thank you, no! All that I need is to sit here for a few moments with you and the fan, if you will be so good. You know standing up being introduced to people for two or three hours steadily is wearing. And I am not used to that sort of thing."

"I know," he said sympathetically. "I have often wondered how any of you stood it."

Their conversation, which continued for many minutes, was not brilliant, but it was entirely satisfactory to both of them. Joan had become absorbed in an account of the last tennis tournament of the season, in which Malcolm had taken part. Her eyes were fixed interestedly upon his face, and her expression responded to every turn of his narrative. Her companion found himself beginning to grow unexpectedly eloquent, and also more and more lost in admiration of his companion. The tournament was finished, and he had just begun upon the great Midlothian golf match, now approaching, when the girl looked up to find the tall figure of Courtenay before her, his eyes gleaming somewhat sarcastically upon his young brother-in-law's annoyed face, as he said, with a hint of significance in his voice:

"My dear Miss Howard, we cannot permit Malcolm here to monopolize you for the entire evening. Mrs. Van Alyn asked me to come and take you to the ball-room, or in the direction of an ice, if you prefer it. Do you dance, Miss Howard?"

In this last sudden question Joan saw nothing pointed, but Malcolm reddened furiously under what he considered an insult. Up to this moment he had, beneath the spell of her magnetism, forgotten certain

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innuendoes he had heard, and now his fingers worked nervously as he stared at the man before him.

The débutante perceived that Mrs. Van Alyn—or somebody else—wished the tête-à-tête stopped, and she rose at once, gracefully. Courtenay felt the little tremor of her hand as she accepted his arm, and was gratified by it. He looked at her face out of the corners of his eyes, and took a sudden resolution. Malcolm Van Alyn, with a strong phrase unuttered on his lips, watched the couple as they disappeared down the room.

When they had progressed silently for some moments Joan suddenly answered Courtenay's question:

"No, Mr. Courtenay, I do not dance. It was not taught in the convent where I have lived. But I shall learn as soon as possible. I am quite ashamed of the deficiency, and shall take private lessons if possible."

"What would be the use of that, Miss Howard?" asked Courtenay, slowly. "Here is a good floor, there is excellent music—and behold in me a most willing professor."

Joan laughed aloud. "Fancy it!" she said. "All these conventionally revolving couples suddenly beholding me with my skirts held so, you, with your coat-tails out, facing me, and then here we go! One, two, three, turn half round and then back!" As she spoke the girl suited action to words, and executed a sudden little pirouette with such a quick and cat-like grace that Courtenay looked at her in astonishment.

"Not much doubt—now," he muttered to himself, still watching her. But aloud he said: "No necessity for taking others into our confidence, Miss Joan.

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There is the Turkish room, just off the hall. Not a soul in it. We can drop the portière, and I warrant we shall not be intruded upon. Will you come?"

Joan hesitated, met his eye bent curiously upon her, then threw her head aside, and went. Courtenay followed her closely, saw her within the room, unhooked the fastening of the curtain with a slight twist of his left hand, and they were alone. Edith Kent, who was dancing in the ball-room, was the only one who had seen their entrance.

Joan seated herself slowly on a small, cushioned stool, and then looked up at her partner with her mouth drawn mockingly. The low strains of a waltz came dreamingly in to them. The girl hated its melody forever after. But now the blood in her veins flowed hotly.

"Well," she said, laughing, "you may begin now, professor."

Courtenay, however, had not the least intention of making an exhibition of himself before the girl, whom he was doing his best to fascinate. He wanted to see how far she would go, he thought to himself.

"My pupil is expected to do the work," he replied, leaning back on the divan, and taking a cigarette-case from his pocket.

"Will you have one of these, Miss Howard? They are very mild, I assure you."

"A cigarette, do you mean?" she cried, horrified.

Courtenay raised his eyebrows and looked amused. "Why not? Most ladies smoke nowadays, you know. Possibly they did not look upon them with appreciation at your convent, but really there are not half a

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dozen of your uncle's guests here to-night who do not use them."

Joan did not answer, but watched him intently as he lighted the slender white roll and began puffing the blue, filmy rings up from his lips delicately. He was apparently lazily watching them, but really he was reading the thoughts which the girl before him displayed so unconsciously upon her untrained face. He was not unprepared, then, when she leaned impulsively forward and said in a low voice, "Give me one."

"I give them away only on certain conditions," he answered, imperturbably.

"What are the conditions?"

"That you will let me light your first one for you."

"Very well. That is not difficult, surely," was the innocent reply.

He smiled, and took a fresh one from its case, holding it up for her. She came forward, her heart beating violently. This was the height of impropriety to her. He put the thing between her lips, and drew her face down to his. "Here is your light," he said softly, touching the end of his own cigarette, which was still in his mouth, to hers. Joan grew cold, but could not remove her eyes from his. One of his arms held her closely, he touched her other hand, with his, lightly. The girl's heart gave one great throb, and with all her strength she pushed him from her, flung the scarcely lighted cigarette away, and staggered to the door of the little room, her eyes flaming, her cheeks like death.

But Courtenay could not afford to let her go in that way. He had gone too far, and he knew it



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instantly. Rising hastily, he quietly took her arm and drew her back again to the chair in which she had first sat. He, too, had flung his cigarette away, and he stood up before her, regarding her calmly:

"Miss Howard, I couldn't let you leave me feeling as you do. I owe you an apology, a very earnest one. I forgot myself utterly, and behaved to you in an unpardonable manner. Can you forget what has passed—will you try to forgive me?" His manner now was that of a perfectly restrained gentleman. Joan looked him squarely in the face, still trembling a little.

"You need not apologize. The fault was as much mine as yours. I did not act as a lady should. The pardon must be mutual—and I trust that both of us will forget. Will you take me back to my uncle?"

They passed out of the Turkish room, coming face to face with Edith Kent and Malcolm, who had finished a dance together. When they had gone Edith's eyes still followed them. "Malcolm," she said, "your brother is a very handsome man. Miss Howard is young, is she not?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Don't be angry, my dear boy. It was a foolish speech. I must have been imagining myself to be Eleanor Felton. I should like some frappé, please."

Joan and Robert Courtenay passed back through the long rooms, the girl looking on every side for her father, Courtenay watching her gravely out of the corners of his eyes. His feeling toward the girl had changed. He was beginning to wish that he did not know her parentage. But as for doubting that par-

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entage now—he could not. Hair, eyes, face, manner, all showed the mother in her, and the little exhibition of her grace in the dancing hall was final and convincing proof. Above all else he wondered at Stagmar's temerity in not giving her his own name—or indeed any name than the one she bore. "But for all that," thought Courtenay, "she's got more in her than her mother has. Helen would have let me light the cigarette."

"There is your uncle, Miss Howard, in the corner
"I've been looking for you, Joan," said Stagmar, as she went up to him. "Mrs. Van Alyn wished to say good-night. She was obliged to go early."
with Chatsworth and Kent."

The girl crimsoned, murmured "I am very sorry," and glanced swiftly at Courtenay. She wished that he would leave her. She was uncontrollably ill at ease in his presence, but she dared not speak. For a few moments he stood chatting with his host, and then walked away with the doctor. Anxiously the girl watched her father, whose eyes were following Courtenay's retreating form, and a thrill of terror crept over her lest he had seen! But the writer's thoughts were fixed on something different and more serious. He was thinking of the worn green tables at All Sinners'.

The crowd in the rooms was thinning now, for it was late. Kent came up with his daughter, about to send her off to the dressing-rooms before taking upon himself the delicate task of withdrawing his wife from the side of dear, dear Doctor Snippington, whom she had succeeded in monopolizing for full twenty minutes

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to the exclusion of half a dozen languishing and envious ladies. The divine had enjoyed himself royally that evening. He had partaken of no less than seven convivial glasses of rare old Madeira, he had stolen one wee waltz with charming Mrs. Courtenay, and for the rest of the time had devoted himself assiduously to the fairest of the fair members of his parish, for whose benefit he had had the luck to remember and quote several Scriptural passages of great fitness. Also, in an unobtrusive way, he had materially added to his fine collection of local gossip and spicy stories of all parts of the world.

The Kents had taken their departure, and now the Courtenays came up for their farewells. Marie did it gracefully in French, and passed on as her husband stopped for a instant to whisper, "You'll be down later, won't you, Bertie?"

Stagmar looked thoughtfully at the reckless fellow. "Why not go to bed at home to-night, Bob?"

"Tut, Stagmar! Don't be priggish. You've made a great success of the niece, my boy," and as he went off Courtenay showed all his fine teeth in a mocking laugh.

It was two o'clock when the host stood by the staircase to bow adieu to his last guest. Joan Howard had already gone to her room. Carson, the obsequious, was covertly blinking at the oaken door. Eleanor Felton, shrouded in a heavy cloak of green velvet and silver, rapidly descended and gave her hand to Stagmar, who bent over it in silence for a moment.

"What do you think of her, Eleanor?"

"If Helen Howard looks like that—Herbert, who

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could blame you? Only for God's sake be careful of her! It is a fearful responsibility to be father to such a woman."

"Yes, Eleanor—I know it. Have you seen anything?"

"No. Malcolm Val Alyn is engaged to Edith Kent."

With this enigmatic response, she passed out of the door.

"Do you wish anything more, sir?"

"The brougham, Carson. I am going to the club."

CHAPTER VIII

THE HUMAN HEART.

The reception which had introduced Joan Howard to Chicago society proved a turning point in the personal histories of several people prominent in that society. From this night Joan Howard herself dated a definite though indefinable change in her attitude toward her surroundings and companions. To most people this revulsion comes once or twice during life. The atmosphere, the ordinary aspect of everyday habits is changed, how, we do not know. Only the old life has now become prehistoric and vague as a distant memory. Old thoughts and beliefs are new, and new ones, which we had fondly cherished as something great and modern, have become old and useless. And in the first strange hours of this old-new existence, the moment which begot the change is somehow always with us, buried out of sight in our inner consciousness, whence we sometimes drag it to examine it suspiciously, as the cause of weary unrest and irritation.

Joan was changed for the worse. All the latent mother in her had suddenly come to the surface of her nature, crowding down behind it the old sense and sincerity which had been her sterling qualities. At the time, those moments with Courtenay in the Turk-

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ish room had filled her with disgust and regret. Now, to her distorted fancy, they appeared to be the only moments she had ever lived. Ordinary routine she began intensely to dislike. The memory of her existence at the convent was unbearable. She was restless, irritable, selfish. Courtenay was rarely out of her mind, and the fact that he was a married man made no difference to her now. Rather it seemed an added zest to her strange passion. In reality this man was the idol to which she clung during her passage from God back to God again. This stage, too, comes to us all, and a bad bit of road it is. Lucky are they who reach it early on their life-journey, for Fate, being fickle, often puts into the hands of Youth the staff of a strong illusion which she denies to the old and feeble, who need it the more. Therefore, these, perchance the greatest of souls, never pass this stretch of mud and rock on earth, but must be content to rest wearily upon the dusty wayside, to sigh as they strain their dim eyes toward the happy ones who have gained the marl highway beyond, which stretches out, smooth and straight, toward the Sunset City, leagues and leagues away.

Curiously enough, Miss Howard saw very little of Courtenay during this time. The little intercourse that lay between them was also decidedly unsatisfactory. When aware that she was to meet him at the house of some acquaintance the girl never failed to dress with particular care and taste, and experienced many an hour of uneasy anticipation beforehand. And then, when they stood again face to face, she trembled, saw him bow coldly and significantly, felt

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his eyes upon her for a moment as she passed on, and then knew that he would address not one word to her during the entire evening, leaving her to talk with some one for whom she cared not a jot, growing hot each time his form met her eyes, and finally, after his departure, she would be fiercely wretched with the anger of humiliation. And of all this Stagmar was happily ignorant. Acting upon Miss Felton's probable suggestion, he watched young Van Alyn. And, indeed, here also was food for meditation.

Courtenay felt himself in a curious position. Since the night that he had held Joan Howard in his arms he had never been able to fix his attitude toward her. She was no stranger to him, yet she was strangely far away. Betimes he cried to himself that he loved the girl; again he felt a repulsion toward her that augured not well for a devotion which should be in any way lasting. Never in her presence was he indifferent, and for this very reason he placed upon himself the restraint which so annoyed her, and which was not easy for him. It gratified him, however, to perceive that she was annoyed, and had it not been for her unfortunately expressive face Joan Howard might have been spared the disappointments which so bitterly affected her.

At this time, too, Robert Courtenay had more serious matters upon his mind than a girl's penchant for him. The facts set forth in the short conversation between Doctor Kent and young Garth, recounted in the last chapter, were not exaggerated. The singular luck which had attended him during his entire career at the card-table hitherto, so faithfully that his pro-

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fession had become the table, had apparently deserted him. The first three nights' play with the writer had left him badly off, and since then reckless anger had plunged him deeply enough in debt to disturb even a more constitutional nonchalance than his. His pockets were never empty, but to pay for this his bank-book was not a cheerful sight, and Robert Courtenay's penciled black brows were drawn and rough whenever he was forced to open it. And, worse than all, his name was now spoken in whispers among clubmen, and there were games in which he was not asked to join.

During these weeks he continued to visit the dancer. La Caralita had grown doubly interesting to him now, since the strange advent of another Howard into his life. Helen was wonderingly grateful for his steadfastness to her in her trouble, and her liking for him grew strong with her gratitude. But Helen Howard could not know what those long, curiously thoughtful looks at her meant. How should she guess that he had come only to study her daughter in her? No, not all for that, for Helen's own fascination had not deserted her; but how much he learned in that quiet intercourse with her she never knew. Continually he saw and remembered some quaint gesture or trick of speech in the mother which twenty-four hours later he verified in Joan, during one of the distant vigils that he kept over her while Malcolm Van Alyn, at her side, was pouring all his glowing admiration from eloquent eyes on her, who sat by him impatiently and vainly waiting. And Courtenay noted all, and was satisfied—perfectly satisfied.

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Only once did there escape him a spark of that magnetism which thrilled throughout his impetuous nature. For one instant he used it, and then recalled it instantly, astonished at the quick flame that leaped from the smoldering fire in her eyes. It was at a theater. The Kents had invited a large party to see Madame Modjeska as Mary Stuart, and Courtenay sat in the box with Edith, Malcolm, Joan, and Mr. Hamilton. He sat directly back of Miss Howard, who was wholly absorbed in the piece. Upon her mobile face the varying emotions of the great tragedy were reproduced in perfect order, and she sat with her head strained forward, utterly unconscious of anything going on around her. It was this oblivion to all things which tempted Courtenay to try her. Wishing fully to test his power he waited until the greatest climax had come. No one could perceive him, for the house was dark. Gradually and very slowly he leaned forward until his head was so close to Joan's that his breath stirred the spirals of hair upon her neck. His eyes fixed upon the little of her face that was visible, he gazed at her unwinkingly, steadily, until the force of his mind was projected into hers. It was but a moment before he noticed a change. Her attention was distracted. Her eyes wandered from the stage and back to it again, restlessly. She shivered, and he saw the trembling. Then, almost imperceptibly, her head began to turn, slowly, steadily. There, in the darkness of the house, with the words of the great actress falling unheeded upon their ears, the eyes of these two met in one gleaming flash. For a second Joan swayed, helplessly, then with a mighty effort she

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murmured in a choked voice, "Please—Mr.—Cour—ten—ay—" Instantly his face changed, and he was looking at her with an air of attentive inquiry as Van Alyn, distracted by her voice, leaned toward them.

"Miss Howard wished her wrap," remarked Courtenay, reaching for it.

"Thank you," murmured the girl, with chattering teeth. "There must be a draught from the stage."

"Doubtless," came the courteous reply, as he placed the cape about her shoulders.

And this, without mentioning the annoyance to Edith, who was displeased with the interruption, was all that was said about the matter at the time. But Joan Howard never forgot the circumstance, nor was she ignorant of the cause.

Young Malcolm Van Alyn had seen only the conclusion of this little drama, but young Malcolm Van Alyn was by no means blind. Those short sentences of Edith's on the night of Stagmar's reception: "Your brother is a handsome man. Miss Howard is young, is she not?" had been indelibly written upon his memory. Betimes they haunted him; and since that night he had intercepted several small passages of the eye between the redoubtable Robert and the instinctive if inexperienced girl whom he so greatly admired. He had not yet mentioned these facts to his brother-in-law, but the time when he would do so was drawing near, for he had already rehearsed several imaginary scenes between them.

Van Alyn's attentions to Miss Howard were already commented upon by members of his family's particular clique of society, although that society was per-

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fectly accustomed to an old habit of his. For years his marriage with Edith Kent had been recognized as a certain event of the future, but the young lady in question had never objected to any of the meaningless flirtations which he had chosen to carry on by the score. Scarcely a débutante of the last two seasons, ever since Malcolm had borne off his last Harvard laurels, and submitted the last of his college debts to his father, but had, at some period of her year, been the recipient of his bouquets, candy, and pretty phrases. But after each one of these he had returned to his quasi-fiancée, who received him with an amused smile and a sisterly word of welcome. Naturally, then, Miss Howard was regarded as the thirtieth favorite, and her reign was fixed on for a month. Clubmen bet upon it, and their wives smiled discreetly over the twain. Only Malcolm himself, and possibly Eleanor Felton, saw in it something more serious than a flirtation. Joan was amused, but thought little of his devotion, except that it was her place to receive homage. But Malcolm grew troubled as he began to realize the full power of her attraction. He began to dread the sight of Edith as he had never before done. Hitherto none of his galaxy had been comparable to his prospective wife, as he had formerly liked to call her. Nowadays that term did not come readily to his lips. Instead he came to wonder vaguely over the fact that he had never formally offered himself to Edith, and he pulled himself up with a flush when he found that his heart lightened at the thought. Why was he bound to Miss Kent? Regarding it seriously, he did not know, only

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that he felt sure that she expected it. But Joan? Did Joan know how he cared for her? Did she care for him? Had she ever shown him any feeling deeper than coquetry? Perhaps not. Ah, but if that were so, he would *make* her care. He would wait, be very careful, very devoted. And then, as his pretty air-bubble was about to take on shape and color, to suit his ready imagination, insidious conscience crept in again with the distressing whisper—"and Edith?"

Between these two fires the boy led a wretchedly hot existence for a couple of weeks or more, until there came the incident at the theater. Little as he had seen of Courtenay's experiment, that little had awakened in him an angry suspicion and brought his determination to the climactic pitch. Late that evening, when the supper was over, and the ladies safe at home, Van Alyn, who was striding moodily toward the club in the company of his brother-in-law, suddenly shattered the silence.

"Bob—look here—"

"Where?" inquired Courtenay, with polite interest, emerging from a gloomy reverie.

"Don't get into that mood," retorted the other, sharply. "I want you to tell me honestly just how much there is between you and Miss Howard."

Robert's eyes opened wide and green in the darkness. "What is that to you?" he murmured softly.

Van Alyn was silent for a moment; then replied, with checked insult in his tone, "My sister happens to be your wife, you know."

"A poor reason in these days, my boy. Or no reason at all, since I might retaliate by recalling to

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your erratic memory your own engagement to Miss Kent."

Malcolm's boot struck the sidewalk with sufficient force to make his foot tingle painfully. His tone was violent. "I am no more engaged to Edith Kent than you are!"

"Tut, my boy. You are negligent as well as very nervous."

"Tell me, Courtenay," and the tone was imploring now.

"Malcolm, what difference can it make to you, the heir of one of the first families of this great city, how much of a flirtation I choose to carry on with the fatherless daughter of an actress, Helen Howard?"

The reply to this brutal speech was a heavy blow across the mouth from Van Alyn's gloved fist. "That is the difference it makes to me!"

Courtenay staggered backward more from astonishment than anything else. "We are somewhat past the age for a midnight fracas in the streets," he said, slowly, "but if you will be at the club to-morrow at ten, I shall be quite ready to meet you with whatever—"

"No, no, Bob. Don't. The age for duels is also past. I'm no coward, but I could neither injure you nor be injured by you. I didn't know what I was doing. I am sorry I struck. You see I'm awfully in earnest. Tell me how you can know that she is the child of—of that—creature."

Courtenay was fond of Malcolm Van Alyn. Much as he affected cynicism, the straightforward sincerity of the younger one pleased him highly. Therefore his

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anger cooled as quickly as it heated. But he remained serious. Putting his hands upon the shoulders of the other, he whirled him around and faced him quietly for a moment. "Malcolm, take my advice. Don't make a fool of yourself over Helen Howard's daughter. Go to see La Caralita for yourself once or twice. I'll give you the address. Then tell me whether I lied or not. There now, all right, my boy. I forgive you, and let us both forget it. Just wipe my face off with this handkerchief. There, your hand, and gently this time. All right."

Heigho! In this queer world men take queer notions into their heads. Evenings found Van Alyn still at Joan's side, and daytimes saw him in Helen Howard's tiny drawing-room, never quite at his ease with her, yet filled with wonder at the superb fascination which pain and sorrow had only increased in her strange nature. But Malcolm, though he still eagerly followed his lady, had changed, and become so pensive that society said with calm satisfaction that the reign of one more belle was ended. Alas! Society, wise as it is, knows not everything.

Edith Kent was not disturbed at the pensive attitude of her quasi-lover. To tell the truth she did not spend much time in thinking over Malcolm, one way or the other. The trend of her own thinking upon one subject was serious enough to occupy all the time that a society favorite may happen to have for that dangerous exercise. It was her feeling about Stagmar which troubled her. She was beginning to regard the sentiment with an emotion akin to fear. Herbert Stagmar, a man whom she had all her life regarded as

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a genius, one who was to stamp his name deep into his time, a man who stood upon a lofty pinnacle of fame, far removed from all the ordinary world except in actual presence, this man looked up to by a nation, was gradually and steadily coming down from his place toward her, nearer and nearer, until she almost felt the ability to approach his inner self and probe the depths of that strange, grave spirit. He had revealed himself to her of late, involuntarily, through his eyes and lips, and she had listened and wondered over his words, and in his presence she was moved by a nervous joy. Why, then, should she care for the boyish affection of Malcolm Van Alyn, whom, despite his twenty-five years, she always regarded as her junior? That affection seemed so small in comparison to—to what? The answer she dared not frame in words. But at the time when she felt her great hope more possible, when the light all about her was tinted and clarified with roseate gold, behold then the cloud came into her sky in the shape of Joan Howard. Who was Joan Howard? What was Joan Howard? Why was Joan Howard? "Stagmar's niece," said Society, calmly, and then half of Society, the trousered half, blinked discreetly, and the other half, who have caught the reputation of being fair, smiled sweetly, and waited for a chilly afternoon, some bits of embroidery, and hot chocolate.

Oh, masculine ones, husbands, brothers, lovers, and would-be Brummells, how long will you continue to regard femininity as big-eyed and innocently gullible? Just so long, perhaps, as you have anything which you must conceal. But do you fancy that your

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own vices are not strongly mirrored in all those artless and artistic little heads? Have they, think you, neither knowledge nor suspicion in their befrizzled depths? Because women are not supposed to play poker or drink things stronger than unliquored oyster-cocktails, do you imagine that they have no ideas upon these subjects, and have not at times earnestly longed to enjoy them, having never experienced the actual vulgarity of the manly existence? And do you still fancy that they are not aware of the worst things that you do? It might, perhaps, come as something of a shock to your manly nerves to hear stories—stories that you have done your best to keep from the ears of your own boon companions, fall from the rosily transparent lips of some carefully bred young girl, sitting cosily with a group of her kind, who, in the dainty bedroom, are sipping warm, lemoned tea, and crumbling ladies'-fingers. Have you any conception of the thoughts floating through the brain of that demure little débutante in blue and silver who rests as heavily as a bit of thistle-down on your arm as you promenade sedately round the ball-room? Have you an idea that she is recalling some of the most unpardonable scenes of your own wildest grain-days? No? Well, well, a man is sometimes less conceited than one would fancy!

To return to Edith. She heard whispers concerning Joan Howard's origin, but Herbert Stagmar was a man held too high in the esteem of most of the women whom he knew for the usual amount of malice to enter into their speculations concerning him. For the author was a power among womankind, and when

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the quieter sex do occasionally set up an ideal—which, by the way, is not so often as is generally supposed—they are very loyal to it, and will do much to keep it unsullied. At first some few would-be exclusive ones raised an eyebrow, and whispered dubiously, but the scale turned quickly. Mrs. Van Alyn had called upon Miss Howard, and Joan's position was secure. Ye gods! How does the lightest zephyr sway our life's happiness for good or ill at times!

Edith never spoke of Joan except with pleasant indifference before people, but to herself she was free to speak, and speak she did. She felt toward Joan a strange, respectful antagonism. Perhaps a lioness might so regard a female tiger. She admired the girl and disliked her. She felt Joan's fascination and perceived her youth. She saw character in the mouth, but danger in the eyes. She beheld both beauty and ugliness. Joan was a book in a strange language, of which she could only here and there comprehend a phrase. For the father in her, Edith, although she only dimly perceived the resemblance, liked her at once warmly. And Joan herself, who saw but little of the other girl, grew to feel toward her as to some one who would be severe in triumph and tender in hours of woe. Joan liked her for this according as she deserved, but never presumed on the acquaintance.

Edith never thought to mention Miss Howard to Eleanor Felton. Had she done so she might have learned something of value. Miss Felton had studied the girl thoroughly, and come to a decision regarding her. The old maid has the unusual gift of being able to regard a subject from two standpoints, thus pos-

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sessing the power of impartiality—a tremendous thing in a woman, and one of which she made good use. In Stagmar's case her heart had overpowered her brain, and she did not regret it, for even as he was she could not afford to lose such a friend. Eleanor was a great lover of the beautiful, and had early been prepossessed in Joan Howard's favor. She was wont to declare that she had never seen a beautiful woman. She had now decided that Helen Howard must be beautiful, and that with the stern molding of experience Joan would be also. Eleanor was contemplating a call upon the ex-dancer, and shook her head wrathfully when her own good sense showed her the impossibility of this course. But she liked Joan, albeit she knew that there was danger in the girl's nature, and she perceived also that which was not generally felt, the heritage of a lofty dignity that had fallen from father to daughter, and would serve her well at a pinch.

As to Malcolm Van Alyn's sudden fire, the older woman had seen that, too; had watched the look in his eyes, heard the quiver in his tone which was strong with emotion, and decided that it was far more than the usual nonsense. And she was not displeased, having Stagmar's interest more at heart than Jim Kent's.

"Why not?" she remarked calmly to herself. "It is always a mistake to let two children grow up with the idea that they are to marry each other some time. I should be pleased to see the idea proved false."

But could she have known Herbert Stagmar's real

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mind—it might have been unfortunate for their friendship.

In truth the writer had just begun to recognize the attitude of his thoughts toward Edith. She had become more to him than he would have believed possible. He saw the beauty of her nature marked in the strength of her features. Her grace and graciousness dawned upon him now as they had not heretofore. And at times her great eyes held for him in their wistful repression something that made him cover his face and groan aloud in anguish. He had known the young girl for years, but his love for her had been born in one sudden instant and had grown upon him unawares, until now it surged impetuously through his reserved nature. It was none the less strong that he could not himself explain it. During his first days of realization Stagmar endured much that another man would have called unendurable suffering. The love of man for woman is the strongest of the emotions. Woman may love better than man, but the very need of loving, her sentimentality, enables her to sacrifice the one she loves if necessary with less actual pain than the man would feel in the same instance. The fact that Stagmar was strong enough to hide his love from all the world, save an occasional involuntary betrayal to Edith herself of something of his feeling, was no proof that his misery was any the less strong. Night after night he watched the hours wear away as he sat before his desk, unable to work, or to do aught but wretchedly deny himself what his whole being cried out for. Was his second passion as mighty as the first? Nay, they could not be compared. To

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Helen he had given the free fire of his heart ; for Edith he would have poured out all the pent-up, restrained longing of years, which seemed suddenly to belong to her. Often toward early morning, when life is weakest and the pulses beat slowly, a tardy slumber would visit him for an hour, and he would wake with a mighty start from a dream in which he had forgotten his lawful wife, the vivid memory of which would remain in his waking mind like a warning.

At this time a sudden sympathy made the writer watch his daughter closely. It was a pity that her sleepless nights and irritable days were all ascribed to a waning devotion on Van Alyn's part. It was curious, yet inevitable, that Stagmar should never think of Robert Courtenay in connection with Joan Howard. Courtenay was frequently in his mind these days. Most of Courtenay's *bien-aimés* did give an occasional half-hour to the discussion of his difficult position. It was clear to those who had seen anything of him during the last weeks that Bromler Van Alyn's son-in-law was in a way to need a great deal of help from Bromler Van Alyn's comfortable bank account ; but whether that gentleman would consider it a part of his quasi-paternal duty to assist the husband of his only daughter, or, still more speculative, whether Courtenay would deem it possible in his position of gentleman to ask for that assistance, were matters that admitted of many an exciting wager between Courtenay's confrères of All-Sinners'.

Robert Courtenay had been wont to make what income he could between the Board of Trade by day and the poker-table by night. This fact would have

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been considered by himself and his friends to be brusquely stated, but it puts the matter in the most concise form. Ordinarily the yearly figures in one of his little memorandum books were not unpleasant to regard, for he was skillful in any so-called game of chance. But a fit of uncontrollable recklessness, coupled with the most consistent ill-luck, had within a month transformed the thought of green baize into a nightmare of dread to the usually nonchalant young gentleman. And his experience in the wheat-pit had equaled the cards. For a couple of weeks the market had been strained, and, inspired by an evil genius, Courtenay had bought continually, until now his margins stood at unreflectable figures. Marie only laughed good-humoredly when she heard that he was losing at play. Money was nothing to her, except that the bills were horribly dirty, and the dollars too clumsy for her delicate purse. And as for the Board of Trade—what was that? She had a vague idea that it was some sort of an old oaken table, around which, in memory of King Arthur, men sat to transact business.

To all appearances Courtenay's friends were more worried for him than he was for himself, for his careless charm of manner never deserted him. Outwardly he watched the thousands go with a smile. But within—ah! there was the tumult of anxiety. He had given up figuring about it; it rested in the hands of his Fate. Once, after a disastrous night, Malcolm walked home with his brother. The boy broke silence with some trepidation, but with honest good-will in his tone:

"I say, Bob, I've a couple of thousand that I haven't much use for just now. If you—"

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"Stop, Malcolm. When I need money so badly that I have to borrow I will come to you, perhaps. But do not imagine that I am in straights yet. Poof! a night's bad luck—what is that?"

Malcolm went on in silence, too surprised and relieved to speak again upon the matter. His mind was at rest. It was just as well that he did not hear the despair in Courtenay's voice as he muttered to himself when they had parted, with a warm, silent hand-shake:

"Two thousand! God! It wouldn't pay a month's interest at Kohn's!"

CHAPTER IX

THE REPRESENTATIVE OF A RELIGION.

During these incidents, and amid all the heart-aches and smiles, intrigues and plans, weariness and eagerness of those people whose inner lives we have been examining, that beloved shepherd of an appreciative flock, the Reverend Titus Emollitus Snippington, went his way softly, gently, carefully, ever leaving behind him a tortuous, curling pathway of little words, deeds, and thoughts, which he was continually dropping from his smiling lips with a furtive air of not wishing any one to perceive how good he was. What matter if the words were lies, the thoughts blasphemies, the deeds deceitful? Titus Emollitus was a complete success.

In the faces of some men there is such a multitude of contradictory emotional remains that it is difficult correctly to judge whether the man be scoundrel or saint. Give the surroundings of these persons the slightest change, only finger skillfully some chord of their natures, and you will make some character spread over their features and proclaim itself boldly, for these features are expressive. Such a one was Snippington. Circumstances had given him, instead of the felon's stripes, the minister's gown and bands. His hair then changed to a pure and silky white, and

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the crow's-feet around his mouth and eyes turned decorously down, giving to his pale face a continual expression of repressed pleasure and enjoyment not unpleasant to behold. His little feet and hands never grew knotty, and his knuckles were delicately dimpled. His voice was whisperous, at times almost musical, while his unmistakably watery blue eyes only showed their pale weakness occasionally from under his slow and modest white lids. A singularly sweet expression had the doctor at times, except when you examined him sensitively. If you were so imprudent as to do that, you were very liable to say "Ugh!" suddenly, and shake yourself, though not able to explain why.

But most of the ladies of Snippington's congregation were not sensitive in that way. St. Matthew's drew the most fashionable congregation in the city, and though "nerves" are very prevalent among the devotees of the Episcopacy and Wirth, I have never observed that their feelings are finer than those of ordinary people. It was, however, a notable fact that the smooth-faced, smooth-haired young men scattered about among the feminine worshipers were hardly to be seen there two Sundays in succession. They changed with the weeks, but it made no difference, as they had evidently been brought along only as adjuncts to the latest thing in church wraps, and because they did nicely to hold the pretty prayer-book, and to hunt out the hymns and the litany. Indeed, Snippington would have done poorly enough had it not been for his ladies. He loved his ladies—particularly the younger ones. And also, he loved their

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attentions and invitations. Besides, it is a rector's imperative and pleasant duty to visit his parishioners at regular intervals, and if you have but few poor in your parish, why, it is not disagreeable. And if you happen to drop in upon one or two of your most valued members near dinner time—parish duties keep one out late sometimes—being requested to partake of the meal, it will not be out of place, after a suitable pause, to accept, taking care to make the blessing beautifully fervent, and remarking upon the excellence of the bread, if there is bread.

Titus Emollitus Snippington had come into life as plain "Snip." And he had not been baptized even by that brief cognomen, for which in after years he became duly thankful. He had been born in the County Hospital, and for his first four years the State Orphan Asylum had been his home. Here he came to merit from his companions the appellation "dirty Snip," while to the matron and some of the attendants he was known as "that dear boy," was patted on the head for his excellent behavior, and occasionally treated to an extra dish of dessert. Thus, even as early as this did he lay the principles to which he clung so consistently in after years.

Such a pattern model in the establishment did Snip become that at length his reward was given him. A lady in deep mourning came to visit the building, and before presentation the children all had their faces scrubbed and their heads smoothed down with a particularly scratchy brush, Snip bearing it patiently, only twice relieving his feelings by pinching the child next him in the line, and not being found out. And when

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the lady, having eyed all the children carefully with her lorgnette, whispered a word into the matron's ear, that good woman nodded and called Snip away to a side room, where he stood like a small saint while the ladies talked him over interestingly. The conversation and questions which followed, and in which Snip conducted himself with unusual precocity, eventually put an end to his asylum life, at which all the children heartily rejoiced. He had been adopted by two respectable elderly people in place of their own boy, who had lately died. Snip's new father was a good old man, not bright, but with an extreme fondness for the classics, which hobby was responsible for Snip's metamorphosis into Titus Emollitus Jones.

Young Titus took to his surroundings like a cork to a bottle. He exhausted four nurses during the first six months of his new career, and it was a curious fact that not one of these attendants could tell just why she felt unable longer to continue in the place.

"I don't know why it is, ma'am," said the last one upon leaving. "I can't just explain it, but Master Titus is so wearin' on a body. He ain't aillin' as I can see. It isn't that he's fretty like. He jest does pester and annoy me so all the time that I declare after a day with him I feel more ready for my coffin than my bed!"

Naturally this vague explanation, which had been given in substance by each of the attendants, failed to convince Mrs. Jones of any fact except that servants were becoming distressingly lazy, and that poor Titus must be having a hard time with the careless girls. So, being tired of changing about, she decided

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to take charge of him herself. This arrangement did not please the boy. His nature had more difficulty now in working itself out. Children of poverty generally possess doubly sharpened instincts as to where their own advantage lies, and Snip had always been particularly remarkable for this trait. He had no intention of showing out his own warped, crabbed, wicked little nature to her who had put him into a comfortable station in life. Therefore he was driven to the expedient of deceit for deceit's sake, which habit never afterward died within him. So he grew up to manhood as rather a comfort to his adopted parents than otherwise. But I do not believe that this was anything to the credit of Snippington's heart. It was not for the sake of the old couple that he walked apparently in the other and straighter path, but for his own vanity and love of respect. When, at the age of sixteen, he was asked by his father what profession he would choose, he considered for some time, and finally replied, "The Church." His parents were pleased at the answer, and from that time he steadily pursued the necessary studies. He was ordained without difficulty, and his first sermon was a marvel of pure old fire and brimstone. Since then, he had grown more lenient, as fashion made leniency both pleasant and expedient.

Before becoming entitled to the Reverend before his name, however, a slight change had taken place in his fortunes, and the name itself was changed for the second time. His adopted father and mother died within a year of each other, leaving not one inconvenient relative to mar the pleasant prospect of their

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pretty fortune, which would henceforth yield up some thousands annually into the hands of the complacent Snip. But as the young man turned over his future in his mind there was one blot upon the fairness of its near perspective—the name of Jones. What great distinction would ever be gained by a Jones? What company of celebrated people could ever have their luster increased by the addition of a Jones?—a Reverend Titus Emollitus, to be sure, but still a Jones. What was there to prevent his becoming something else? Jones would not do. It was known that he had been but an adopted son, and there would be no difficulty in his going back to his original name. His fortune was secure. What his earliest name had been Titus did not know, but he could remember, though he did not like to, that short sobriquet of asylum days. In the end the young divine had a new set of cards engraved, bearing the imposing inscription of “Titus Emollitus Snippington,” and later was added Reverend before the name, and “Assistant Rector of St. Matthew’s Church” after it, in a lower corner. After this Snippington felt that he lived.

His rise upon the social world was rapid and sure, for Snippington had secured the dubious starting point and the devious pathway of his earlier career from the knowledge of his coolly polite acquaintances. As the first years passed, and he grew more high church and more hypocritical, young Snippington’s income increased. He saw people turn toward him less coldly after the “assistant” had come off his cards. He became familiarly “Snippington” to such men as Courtenay, and “dear Mr. Snippington” to their

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wives, and heaven knows how he rejoiced at the words and the tones! Finally, to crown all, two letters were added to his title, which were alike—the fourth of the alphabet.

Snippington had been early enough in the church to have watched the kindling of the social fame-fire of a man whose name he had heard sometimes in the early days—Herbert Stagmar. But he did not know that the only woman he had ever pretended to care for was that man's lawful wife. For this knowledge he would have given half his fortune, for if half of Snip's character was ambition, the other half was jealousy. And he was bitterly—nay, murderously jealous of Herbert Stagmar. He fawned upon the author, called upon him, sent invitations to and accepted them from him, but he never discovered the weak point in the glittering armor. Herbert Stagmar went on, the flames of his great name rose higher and more high, until Snippington cried out despairingly to himself that the fire which had already illumined a continent would never be quenched by aught save the deluge of death. The divine was mistaken, but he did not know it, for with Stagmar as a rival he had no chance himself of luring the fickle maid called Glory to his own side. He contented himself badly, therefore, with afternoon tea, with his ladies and the tolerance of Helen Howard.

Before he had come to know her well enough to grow angry with her, Snippington's relation with La Caralita had been the one softening influence of his life. His affection for this woman approached the unselfish. But she, too, palled upon him in time,

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although he could never break with her altogether. He lacked strength for this. It was now eight years since he had seen her for the first time. Those were before the days of fashionable vaudeville, and such houses were the only ones which the Reverend Titus could with any degree of safety frequent. In some ways his cloth was unfortunate. Even then his little penchant for the mimic world was known to all the men of his acquaintance. They took it for granted, as they did certain others of his habits, and abstained from mentioning these facts to their wives. Such is the loyalty of men to each other.

Ardor has led Snippington to take upon himself the fearful risk of an introduction to the dancer. And out of the shadow of this risk he never lived. Helen had in no wise exaggerated when she said that the minister would have been capable of killing her were their connection made known. For Helen had not forgotten the demoniacal rage with which this man had first heard of the existence of Philip. She had then barely escaped with her life. What he would do were his whole reputation pulled down she dared not think. But, as the boy grew up with seemingly nothing of his father in him, Helen had come to care enough for the child to make Snippington at least provide for him, and that royally. But as for loving him, or thinking of him as in any way connected with that other child, her daughter, her darling of dreams and hopes—never! She pitied the boy, inasmuch as the freedom and joy of life seemed forever lost to him. But after that one disastrous Easter Sunday when he had sung at St. Matthew's, when the child's

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angelic voice had stirred every heart in the building, when the son had moved the congregation as the father had never hoped to do, it was not possible that the boy of a single name should ever be permitted such a course again. La Caralita that afternoon endured such an explosion of rage and torrent of abuse as to force a sudden hate into her heart for the miserable little being who had caused her another spasm of wretched regret for a life that lay so far—far behind.

Or the night of Mrs. Hamilton's dinner Snippington had received two shocks, one coming so closely upon the other that he was not able fully to realize their combined import until later. The first was the announcement of the existence of Stagmar's niece—the young lady whose name was Howard. Snippington had heard the deliberate words of the man he hated with a kind of admiration for the writer's coolness. But at the same time his little brain was filled to bursting with a hope, an idea, a plan which, if it could be brought to an issue, would bring about the one thing which above all others he longed to see accomplished—the ruin of Herbert Stagmar. If he or any one else could successfully circulate a certain story of Joan Howard's origin—a simple thing, seemingly—this "niece" was forever downed, and Stagmar—joy!—Stagmar with her. The minister leaned back murmuring ecstatically to Edith Kent, his head dizzy with plans.

Now Snippington caught half a dozen jibing words from Dr. Kent that turned him sick, and brought his frail little scandal-house tumbling about his ears.

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That story of Helen Howard! Good God! Why had he so imperiled his position? He caught Stagmar's eyes upon him, and writhed in his chair like a lizard. Was it possible that anything was known? He could scarcely frame the question to himself. His whole nature cried out in protest. The remainder of the dinner was torture to him. So distressed was he that he could not leave the house under suspense of suspicion. His tongue ran away with him, and yet it was more a challenge of the eye than of the lip that he gave to Stagmar as they raised their glasses together. And the author took his challenge gallantly, and gave back as severe a one. Snipington fell. You have seen how he toasted the choir-boy. As he left that room his head swam. He was discovered. *Was* he discovered? No, no! He would not have it so. But his step was unsteady when he left the house, and as the hot breath fled from his lips into the cold November night, he shuddered, for he remembered some of the words of his first sermon, and he prayed that there might be no hell for him, but rather oblivion forever.

It was not until the night of her *début* that he met Joan Howard. The thought of her was repugnant to him, but he neither dared nor cared to refuse the invitation to Stagmar's house. So Joan Howard stood before him, and with the first gleam of her red hair there fell upon him the conviction that there would be no lie in the story of whom she was. The very idea of his danger made him shudder. He was perceptibly startled, and yet angry, too, as he felt his host's scornful eyes upon him. He failed to note how much hol-

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lower and more deeply burning those eyes had become of late. And he clenched his little white hand until it shook with rage at his impotence. What a chance had been lost to him through his weakness. To have it in his power to ruin the man he hated, and to have the words stopped on his tongue, frozen with fear for himself! Ah!—"Dear Mrs. Hamilton, how radiant—radiant you are to-night!"

Never for an instant did Snippington consider the possibility of proclaiming Stagmar's guilt at the expense of his own reputation. He was not great enough for that. And if he had been told that even had he exposed the writer, there stood little chance of Stagmar's retaliating upon him, he would have smiled incredulously. Such magnanimity was beyond his ken.

One more incident in this man's career and a disagreeable chapter will be closed.

About one year before the appearance of Joan Howard in the city, and before Snippington had the least idea that a certain few of his doings were inconveniently well known to a certain few of his acquaintances, he had turned over in his mind the idea of taking unto himself a lawful wife. He had begun to grow weary of his life in a fashionable boarding-house. He had cast his eyes about and seen other brethren of the cloth comfortably, even luxuriously installed in pleasant homes—in quarters not so select as the one which he should choose for his residence—finding great solace in the companionship of wives—neither so pretty nor so wealthy as the one he would wed—and perhaps rejoicing in a couple of children—neither

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so quiet nor so clean as those which should some day bear his name. (And in this last vision the Reverend Titus succeeded in barring out all memory of that white-faced little boy to whom he denied a name.) These dreams proved such a comfort in lonely, fire-lit hours that Snippington was in no great hurry to exchange them for reality. Nevertheless, he looked about, and considered many a possible candidate for the fortunate position of Mrs. Titus Emollitus. An actual decision upon this point was not so long in coming as he might have liked. He did not care to choose a *débutante*, and among those girls a trifle older there was but one who seemed in every respect of family, worldly provision, and personal beauty to be entirely fitted for the place. This young lady was Edith Kent. To be sure, he knew of that partial arrangement between the Van Alynys and Kents regarding Malcolm and Edith, but at this he raised his sharp little shoulders pleasantly, and had everything about that settled perfectly in his own positive mind long before he spoke. Poof! What could stand in the way of his own income, position, more mature and therefore safer years, and—ahem!—his own personal appearance. What say ye, oh gods and philosophers of old, as to man's vanity?

Understand from the first, please, that Snippington did not love her. His respect for her and her dowry was too great to admit of there being in it anything of that feeling which was his conception of love. To him, love meant Helen Howard, and since love was troublesome at times, it was as well not to have the

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mischievous god in his everyday household. Mutual esteem would be infinitely more becoming.

Betimes, when the minister had reflected long enough he grew impatient to have his wooing over with. Therefore he chose out a day when the doctor and his wife were certain to be at home. The afternoon he spent at La Caralita's apartment, making himself very agreeable, and presenting her with a large bouquet of orchids. He had not seen her for some time, and the hours passed quickly in her presence. Then, returning to his rooms, he dined, dressed carefully, and at nine precisely rang the bell of the Kent's mansion in very good humor with himself and all the world. The doctor was at home. There was company in the drawing-room. Would he be announced? No; he would see Dr. Kent alone. Very well, kindly wait in the study. Five minutes later the doctors confronted each other.

When Snippington found himself face to face with the genial, open-faced little man whom he had purposed making his father-in-law, the glib words in his mouth suddenly seemed less ready to fall out. His mind was a trifle less clear. He even began stammering, but he found himself again with the sound of his own voice, and what he had to say went on and finished as eloquently as he would have desired. He smiled to himself and stroked his knees and studied the pattern of the rug. He set forth his request and his reasons for it in well-satisfied, pleasant tones, with not too much ardor in them, as became his dignity. Unluckily he did not see the face of Doctor Jim. Kent's jovial smile had died away. His face flushed,

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his hands moved restlessly, his spectacles fell unheeded, he kept himself by main force from snorting aloud. Still the calm, even periods flowed on, just as they did in the short addresses on Sunday. The peroration was beginning with a passage on the beauty of Miss Kent. A moment more, and the doctor, who was well acquainted with the reverend's private history, rose. He was an honest man, was Jim, and it was hard to suppress his feelings. But this he did, knowing himself a gentleman. His voice trembled with just anger, and it sounded thinner than usual. What he had to say was little, but it was decisive. Snippington thoroughly understood by the time the other had finished, that if he had ever had any hopes of marrying Edith, the very apple of her father's eye, he must renounce them now, henceforth, and forever. The minister's face was slightly tinged with red, his hands shook, and he emerged alone from the library, his thoughts in a whirl. He reached the door unattended, and as it closed behind him, Jim Kent, in the library beyond, breathed out a great sigh of relief, and rested his head for a moment upon his two arms. Then, with a strong effort he returned to the guests in the drawing-room, and laughed off the visit of the defeated rector.

Mrs. Kent never heard of the affair, and needless to say, Edith was as ignorant of it as her mother. Therefore, neither one was surprised that Snippington accepted their invitation to a dinner in the following week, and Jim, knowing the minister, was not surprised, either.

CHAPTER X

MANEUVERS IN WHEAT AND A PROBLEM IN HONOR.

One early December day Bromler Van Alyn and his son-in-law walked up town together. Van Alyn was always pleased to find Courtenay in a business mood, as he was to-day. Bromler Van Alyn and "business"—his business—were synonymous terms. He worked at insurance all day, he took it to lunch with him, he carried it home and out to dinner, and at night he dreamed of it. When Van Alyn ceased for one entire hour to think of insurance, it would only be because his body was being prepared for the stately family vault. However, other lines of money-making were not unacceptable to him in the way of conversation. They all smacked of business, and he had a decided fondness for a little turn at the Board of Trade himself occasionally.

Courtenay was in a serious mood this morning, and he was not talkative. His father-in-law did his best to draw him out, but unsuccessfully. The conversation was whirled from one topic to another with alluring irrelevancy, but without result. Robert would come out of his study for a moment, ask a question or two, and then fall back again into oppressive silence. And in very truth Courtenay had good reason

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his stupendous operations, there would be little chance for the bears. He was feared too much for any attempt to hold against him on the part of other speculators, who would all sell rapidly for the best figures obtainable, only keeping prices as high as possible for the time. It was the general idea this time, however, that Stagmar was overreaching himself. Surely no profit could be made on grain purchased at nearly a dollar and a quarter. Former successes had made the man reckless. Courtenay talked of these things, and thought of them and of himself. He saw the future dark before him. There was one thing that might be done, and at the thought of this things the drops of sweat stood out upon the brow of the ruined man. Yes, there were two things to be done—there was suicide and this other. But Courtenay clung to his life. This seemed too small a thing to take it for. And Life had played to him good-naturedly all along. How would it be henceforth? He shuddered.

The offices of Stephens & Whitby were becoming crowded with men whom Courtenay knew well enough to treat civilly. He left the rooms abruptly. It was a sharp relief to be rid of the eagerness of men's voices and the incessant click of the private wire. However much he fought against it, he must think. That one thing that could be done had taken complete possession of his mind. A dastardly thing it was, and a dangerous one. One that would not prevent ultimate disgrace, but which would stave it off, stave it off long enough for him to wipe out those debts of honor, and then be off—off, God knows where, only

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far enough to escape consequences. Could it be done—should it be done? For an instant Courtenay covered his face with his hands, and when he raised his head again his countenance was firm and immovable. He had decided.

He stood now on the floor of the Board of Trade, with a mob of howling men about him, whom he scarcely heard. It had taken but one moment to decide his course, but it must take more than that to complete his plans. The means—the means to a revolting end! Here lay the difficulty. Money was necessary. Money, money for money, money for life, for happiness, for everything in this wretched world! It is hard to be an upright, dishonest gentleman. But such people there must be sometimes. Courtenay was thankful for an idea which could help him to act out his part a little longer. And now, in accordance with that rôle he joined a jovial party of acquaintances who were repairing to a neighboring hotel, wherein they rented a private room in which lunch was served to them daily. Business men were they all, and nervous with anxiety over affairs of the day on 'Change.

"How are things now?" inquired a lawyer who had not seen the reports for a couple of hours, as they entered the office of the Grand Pacific.

"Wheat is jumping around like h—," gasped a small man in a red tie, who had lately covered several sheets of paper with calculations of a debt resulting from ten minutes of rash haste, and which ran well up into five figures. "It's ten minutes since I left Stephens', and the Lord knows where it is now."

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"It's Stagmar," explained young Garth. "He's the fellow. They say he's had three millions already this morning, and is trying to bring wheat down to one twenty for another."

"Stagmar?" asked Courtenay, joining them at the elevator. "I've just sent a boy to hunt him up to ask if he's going to lunch here to-day. Every man in town'll be after him."

There was a chorus of approving exclamations, and then the little man continued his former conversation. "He can't do it. He can't bring wheat down again. They won't let it be done. They are going to fight him hard this time to keep him outside. They haven't forgotten two years ago. Why, you remember, he—"

"He ruined half the bucket-shops in town," interrupted the lawyer dryly, "and a d—d good thing, too. Stagmar is stiff, but an honest man's all right with him. He's game for fight this time, though. I saw him this morning, and the Old Nick is in him."

"How far will wheat go, think, Garth?" inquired Courtenay, languidly. Robert cared less about its possible rise now than he had for months.

"How far will it go, Bob? The Lord knows. I don't believe Stagmar will buy at over one twenty-five, and if it were anybody but Stagmar I'd say he was a fool to do that."

"Stagmar is a fool, though," announced the lawyer, belligerently. Then he added, eyeing Courtenay closely, "It is my opinion that for the next ten days wheat is going to move on up rapidly."

Courtenay knew very well the motive for this

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speech, as did every other man at the table. Therefore, putting on his most bored, blasé, and careless manner he remarked, drawlingly, "Good time to buy outright, eh? And sell again next week."

"Humph! None so easy to sell high after delivery, even if stuff does stay up, for the reason that a good many fools aren't going to be able to make their margins good, and are going to go under completely, which is bound to tighten the market," retorted the lawyer, irritably. He wanted to make Courtenay wince, but the young man did not move a muscle. The others laughed inwardly at his smiling tone, "No! Really? How silly of them!"

By this time the steak had been brought in, when a sudden sharp signal from the telegraph in the corner of this private room brought Garth quickly to its side and the rest to their feet. The next moment there was a mad rush to the wire at the young man's hysterical exclamation: "By the Lord above! either I or the market has gone mad! Here's wheat registered at one nine, and still falling!"

Courtenay's knife clashed to his plate, the lawyer had already seized the narrow strip of paper, and the small man made a wild run for the door, bringing up in the arms of a tall, stalwart form just coming in.

"Well, gentlemen, you seem excited," said Stagmar, smilingly.

There was utter silence for a moment. The small man came quietly back to the table. Then Garth asked, slowly, going nearer to him:

"Is this true, Herbert? Is wheat at one nine?"

"You should complain of your reports, my dear

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fellow. They send them to you too slowly. Wheat must be now at one twelve at least, I should say."

Courtenay rose again. "What do you mean? It is not going up again?"

"It is, though," replied the lawyer, in a dazed fashion, as he scanned the paper strip. "This says one eleven and an eighth."

"Tell us about it, Stagmar; we're fools," implored the little man.

"Indeed, your lunch may have proved costly to some of you," responded the great man, gravely. He sat down to the table and talked as he ate.

"You are evidently not aware of some of those things which the Board has been finding out during the last half hour or so, and if you will permit me, I will relate them to you. The day's circumstances have really been rather remarkable, and I beg you to believe that if they have run in my favor it has been purely chance, not design. Early this morning the rumor ran that some one was buying heavily in wheat. That was wrong. I do not account for the story, but the fact is that I myself purchased two million bushels of corn—not wheat."

"The devil!"

"Jove!"

"The Lord forgive you, Bertie, I won't."

"Naturally, when that fact got abroad wheat went down at a bound, and I as naturally began to buy. It was an excellent chance, and I have, I believe, owing to the excellent management of my brokers, secured by now something like three million bushels at between one nine and eleven."

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The little man rose hurriedly at this point. Stagmar looked at him good-naturedly, saying, "Sit down, my dear man; I assure you that by the time you reach a place of business grain will be precisely where it was this morning."

The small man sat down.

"But I don't understand at all," objected Garth. "Stephens & Whitby—"

"Stephens & Whitby are not my brokers this time. I am with Wells & Lake, a firm almost unknown. I should never vouch for reports from other houses under these circumstances."

"And so there is to be no corner after all," remarked the lawyer in an off-hand manner.

Stagmar smiled blandly through him, and rubbed his chin. Only Courtenay caught the look of understanding in his eyes.

"Well, it is a great day, a great day," said Garth, rising. "And if I hadn't been an idiot I might have had something to do with it. Anyhow, Stagmar, I congratulate you on a great stroke of luck or brilliancy or whatever it's been. I must be off now, but not to Whitby's. It is my lunch, please remember. *Au revoir.*"

The lawyer had less to say, and said it in a manner less sincere. A moment later he was off with the other at his side, and Courtenay was left alone with the man of the day. Stagmar's lunch lay before him smoking and barely tasted; Courtenay had pushed aside his cup of cold, dead coffee, and a stain of the liquid was on the cloth near his hand. The food was symbolic of their fortunes. So also were their faces. To

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a certain extent Stagmar was haggard, but his mouth was straight and firm, and his brows were bent earnestly. Courtenay, for the first time in his life, perhaps, looked old, worn, dissipated, blue-white. His shoulders were hunched high, and his head was drawn down between them. He moved his hands a little aimlessly, because they shook. The two were silent for some minutes, Stagmar scrutinizing his companion, Courtenay's eyes wandering restlessly over the delicate walls and mirrors, the littered table, the rugged floor, the slightly soiled window panes, the telegraphic machine in the corner, which now clicked unheeded. Courtenay was nerving himself desperately to speak. Stagmar, reading his manner, helped him.

"Well, Bob?"

For an instant the younger man's head dropped low, and when he raised it his eyes were hard. His opportunity had come; he would take advantage of it. His heels pressed hard upon the floor, but his voice was quiet.

"Herbert, if you will, you can do—a great thing for me."

Stagmar nodded absently, and took mental note of the lowering of a man's pride. He helped himself again to steak before he replied:

"I am glad of it, Bob. What can I do?"

"You know, Stagmar, just as every man in this city does know, that I am in a bad way pecuniarily just at present. But I fancy that not one of them has an idea of just how bad. The fact stands that unless I can obtain a certain amount of ready money before the end of the month I am ruined absolutely."

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Stagmar's face was more serious now, and he studied the table for a moment before replying. "I see, Courtenay; and I'm glad you came to me about it. I must be frank with you, too, however. I do not intend saying anything about it, naturally, but the deal this morning I am going to try to make the beginning of a corner. I think that I can see my way clear to a big profit by May, from the way a mere hint stirred these people up to-day. Naturally, then, my money is to be rather tied up for the next few months, and ready money is less plentiful this year than last. Anything up to ten thousand, however, I can let you have at once, and more later very possibly. As for those gambling notes, if they worry you in the least, I shall be glad to burn them to-night."

At the end of this speech Courtenay laughed wretchedly. Stagmar's ready generosity was infinitely harder to bear than indifference. "My dear fellow," he said, turning his eyes away, and with an unsteady note in his voice, "I'm not begging. I'm not asking charity, merely a favor. It isn't so bad that I can't pay debts of honor yet. It was merely this: I suppose that storage for your grain comes under your calculation of expenses. Perhaps you know that I have an elevator in the city which has been standing idle for a good while. It holds altogether about three million bushels of grain. It is a safe enough one. We can look it over together if you like. What I wanted was for you to store some of your wheat there while this deal of yours is on. The rent is all I shall need."

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Stagmar looked unfeignedly relieved. "By Jove, man! that's as much of a favor to me as it can be convenient to you. The last time I went in for any amount of grain I had an infernal lot of trouble getting storage room enough. It was an actual fact that the men in the pit so looked askance at me that they were willing to go the length of bribing the warehouse owners to refuse me room in the hope that I should be forced to sell out. I was apprehending some trouble of the same sort this time; therefore your offer relieves me greatly. Let me thank you."

When he finished Courtenay's face looked brighter, but he was still grave. "Nay, Herbert, I must thank you. Now, when do you wish to go over it with me?"

Stagmar looked up with surprise in his face. "There is no necessity for that, my boy. I know the elevator, and that is all right. Only have it prepared soon now for the grain, for my shipments are to be hurried through, and the place should be full by the twelfth. The rents and all the technical business will be settled by my brokers, you know. Be—no cigars, thank you—be easy on this score now, Bob, and if there is anything more—"

"Nothing, nothing," said Courtenay, rising quickly with hand outstretched, "and bless you, old man," he muttered. Then suddenly, as with an afterthought, Robert turned once more. "And by the way, you store wheat there, Herbert? I generally prefer—prefer it to corn."

"Oh, my corn is probably gone by this time, Bob. It is wheat that I am after."

But as Courtenay left the room with a nod of satis-

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faction, Stagmar glanced after him curiously. "Now, why should that have made any difference to him—wheat or corn?" The writer tipped the attendant and hurried away once more to the Board of Trade. He had no time to waste that afternoon in conjecture over Courtenay's idiosyncrasy.

That third of December, men said, was one of the wildest days on 'Change that had been known in the history of the city. All the short, dark winter afternoon the lights in the great hall of the Board of Trade blazed high, vividly lighting up the seething, undulating, intertwining mass of men rushing continually from one end of the room to the other, ankle deep in the litter of soiled and torn scraps of paper covered with promiscuous jottings of figures and letters unintelligible to an outsider, but representing fortunes lost or won to the initiated. Here and there, near the whirling mob might be singled out a dozen white-lipped men, standing, paper in hand, writing rapidly, heedless of the clamor about them, only pausing occasionally to brush the trickling streams of tepid sweat from their cheeks. These are men who have stood upon this floor for their last desperate day, or else those who for the first time see before them a vision of life suddenly made livable. There is no way of distinguishing one type from the other.

Though in a manner every one of these was fighting for himself alone, yet all of them were banded together in a central aim also. That object was to distinguish which men were agents of Herbert Stagmar, and to put a stop to their negotiations. This was rendered very difficult, since none there knew the

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brokers who were this time acting for him. It was strange in what fear all these gamblers held this one man, but so it was. Two years before he had taught some of them what hunger meant, and none were anxious to have the lesson repeated. Wheat was high all afternoon, and though there were many buying, it was an unpublished fact that Herbert Stagmar was for the time out of the contest. Had this been known, there would have been such a drop that not a few fortunes would have fallen there on the spot. But the author himself appeared once or twice on the floor during the afternoon, and his addressing nobody was taken as a sign that his men were about him. In reality he was there only to study human nature. It was on this very floor that two or three of the writer's best-known characters, and even the central theme of one of his books, had originated. And here, in this miniature epitome of life, the seer recognized before him every characteristic, vice, and virtue of his sex, save perhaps one, the greatest of them all. And nowhere did he feel himself so pleasantly alone as here, and nowhere was he better able to meditate on many things near to his nature. Such a thing is solitude in the midst of many.

Stagmar's mind was easy as he went homeward in the early evening. He had realized something near a hundred thousand on his corn in that one day, and in the great Northwest there stood to his credit three million bushels of wheat, which would be delivered within five days by train and boat to Courtenay's elevator on the banks of the narrow river which floats so much wealth.

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And Robert Courtenay? Yes, his work also was done. At a few minutes after three that afternoon, he and another, a tall, brawny, bearded fellow, with small eyes and a generous nose, and the dress but not the manner of a gentleman, unlocked the great door of the elevator, which swung back, creaking upon its hinges, for the first time in many months. The inside of the enormous place spread before and above them, gray, and musty, and uncanny, the sound of their voices echoing from the dim, cavernous aisles before them. The wintry light scarcely illumined the doorway. They stood together, these pigmy men, in the narrow passage, and saw, reaching far above their heads, the mammoth wooden bins. Rows of them stretched down the aisle before them, with a network of passages twining about them all. And above these, on towering platforms, were more still, apparently rising upwards hundreds of feet. Here and there, on the heights, stood tall ladders, unsteady and rotten from long disuse.

Courtenay and his companion walked slowly down the passageway, pausing now and again at the sound of a rat or vagrant cat scurrying off into the darkness beyond, the magnified tapping of their feet making the two start apprehensively. At last Courtenay spoke, striving hard to keep the false strain out of his voice.

"Now, understand thoroughly what I want, Depel. You see there is so little coming in that I shall find it more convenient to use the short conductors. Therefore, kindly have the floors about eight feet from the top, and in all the bins. I can knock them out at any time, you know."

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The big man nodded stupidly. "Of course," he said, in thick German-English, "I zee dat it vill be easier for you dat vay. Te bins are de same size, I tink you sait? Vell, den, I measure dis one. For de rest it will not be necessary."

"And they must be in by the day after to-morrow, Deppel. Work at them day and night if necessary. The grain is to be delivered in four days."

"I zee; dey shall be done," replied his companion, solemnly, as he knelt with a rule.

Twenty minutes later the measuring was finished, and the two stepped again into daylight, the door of the great place banging heavily behind them. With a few more words the German hurried off to begin his work. Courtenay, however, still lingered by the side of that celebrated little river that runs always thick and black with the refuse from the great city that hems it in. The gambler stood looking thoughtfully into the stream whose foul odor steamed unnoticed into his face. His expression was grim and hard, but in his eyes lay a sparkle of dread as he muttered slowly to himself: "It might be better. The end—disgrace, banishment, is inevitable anyway. But with three millions—life might be livable anywhere with that!"

With a fierce energy he turned and shook himself. His face was once more quietly determined as he sauntered slowly away. Twenty minutes later he entered a building the lower offices of which bore the sign, "Cantle Bros., Brokers."

"Good-day, Barker; Mr. Cantle in?" he said, addressing a clerk who seemed to know him.

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"Mr. Edward is not in, sir, but Mr. James is in his private office. I'll ask if he can see you."

"Yes, take my card, Barker; it's important."

Barker disappeared and came back a moment later with the request that Mr. Courtenay go in to Mr. James. Courtenay nodded, and found his way unconduted into the private office of the Cantle Brothers. Mr. James was seated at his desk, twirling his pince-nez on a ribbon, as his patron entered. He was an open-faced, frank sort of person, with a manner slightly brusque, and a smile a little stilted, but had you known nothing of him previously you could hardly have guessed from his face that this man had the reputation for being one of the sharpest, most unscrupulous and underhanded rogues that ever escaped the penitentiary. Few people came to the Cantle Brothers for everyday business. Their unheralded fort was the doing of other people's dirty work, and they were very apt, if not given the order for unwarranted methods by their momentary client, to take advantage of the opportunity for their personal benefit. It made no difference to them, just so long as there were laws to get around, who obtained the advantage in the deal, themselves or the other man. So were they constituted.

Robert Courtenay did not appear as a stranger here. He seated himself without looking about, and, disregarding the other's narrow smile of greeting, at once took from his pocket a small paper covered with figures, which he scanned for a few moments before speaking. The broker watched him in silence, waiting for him to speak. Courtenay rubbed his chin and

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raised an eyebrow indifferently before beginning. He felt perfectly at ease and on his guard with this man.

"I've a little commission for you in the New York wheat pit, Cattle."

"Um—"

"There are two million two hundred and fifty thousand bushels to be sold outright, for delivery within two weeks, and they must not, under any conditions, be sold to Mr. Stagmar."

"Um—not always easy to sell outright. I suppose you would go a little lower than the market, if necessary?"

"Yes, if you have to."

"A—your wheat, Mr. Courtenay? That is, to be sold in your name?"

Courtenay looked at him reflectively. "So you can do that now, eh?"

"Certainly. It is very simple. I've made a dozen deals that way since October."

"Very well, then; not in my name. I suppose the commission is higher in that case?"

"Two per cent."

"You're stiff, Jim."

"The risk must be paid for, you know."

"I realize that. Well, can it be done?"

"I think so. If you want to escape Stagmar, it must go to Europe, though. I've no knowledge of his men."

"So there's one man too many for you, is there, Jim? Well, I'm glad to know it. It makes you so much more human."

Cattle smiled a trifle bitterly. "Yes, d—— him!" he said, softly, "I confess that. Selling to Europe,

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though, you couldn't make delivery before the middle of January."

"That'll do, provided it leaves here within six days. Understand?"

"I do. There seems to be nothing difficult about this one. Now, your papers, receipts—red tape, you know."

Courtenay looked at him with a gentle smile. "You fool," said he; "I've no papers."

Cantle turned very serious. "This is too much, Mr. Courtenay."

"What? My calling you a fool? I beg pardon, Jim. I was utterly wrong."

The other laughed, then grew grave again. "It is a thing that we will do for very few people. You *have* the wheat?"

"Naturally, my dear fellow, or I shouldn't have waited so long before trying the game. I have the wheat. I look to see the work done up in good order."

"It is three per cent more. The papers are hard to manage."

"Three more be it. Only leave me a little of the money, Cantle, I implore you. Yours is a good business."

"No better than another, and the risk—wears upon one's nerves. We'll do this for you, though. But the case is unusual. I'd like to know what the devil—"

"Tut, Cantle, curiosity is imprudent—worse than the deal. It is irregular, of course, but no worse than others."

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Cantle bowed ironically, and rose as Courtenay opened the door.

"Good afternoon."

"Good-day, sir."

That was all, and Courtenay stood upon the sidewalk, his day's work over, his breast heavy, and his head whirling dizzily. He put one hand over his eyes, and said, half aloud, "Can't go home. Dinner there—faugh!" And he did not notice the woman who drew her child close to her side, saying, "That man's drunk, Milly. Keep close to me."

* * * * *

Horace Chatsworth was at work in his studio, anxiously watching the sun as it fled from the face of his picture, and praying it, in pagan fashion, to stay up five minutes longer. He was painting a head, an ideal head, for which he had no model. It was life size, a white-faced, night-eyed, sad-mouthed being, whose gaze found its way to the depths of one's heart, and lingered there. The white shoulders were carelessly draped in deep-red, slightly embroidered in dark, purplish blue, and from this coloring the pure semi-transparence of the throat stood out like breathing marble. It was the best thing that the young artist had ever done, and he knew it. He smiled to himself at the thought of how he had come by the idea. It was Joan Howard's Magdalene, just as she had described it to him, he imagined, but he also mistakenly fancied that the face was a creation of his own. It was not. It was merely a portrait of a face which had lain in Chatsworth's mind for some weeks past.

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His five minutes were gone now, and Horace sat before his picture, loth to cover it, even though he could paint no more for another twelve hours. He musingly contrasted this face which he loved with that of the yellow-haired creature now in Stagmar's study—his first conception of the character. The room was almost dark. The little remaining light seemed all to have concentrated upon the pale, pure face of the pictured woman. At the side of the room, facing the canvas, a door opened noiselessly, and the soft, heavy steps of a man sounded on the rug, and then stopped. Chatsworth, unwilling to break this twilight charm, slowly turned his head over one shoulder—and found the spell only heightened. Robert Courtenay, bent, old, haggard, hardened, stood in the doorway, staring with wondering eyes at the face before him. As he gazed the tense muscles of his face relaxed, his expression softened immeasurably. One bare hand crept slowly to this throat, and lay there as though stifling a sound—a sob. A moment later he reeled, and sank to a chair, speaking rapidly and wildly:

“Joan! Joan! Joan's face to reproach me—Joan's eyes to haunt me—Joan's lips to revile me—Joan, my Joan! to hate me, to curse me—to know—to know—”

Chatsworth lighted the gas, and came and took his friend by the shoulders. The touch stilled his quivering nerves. Then the artist drew his easel into a corner, and threw a long white cloth over the canvas. Finally he came and stood before the visitor, who now appeared to be shaking with inward mirth.

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"Bob," said Horace, with his hands in his pockets, "you're drunk."

"No, I'm not," cried Courtenay, jumping to his feet; "but I want to be. Bring your opium, Horace, opium, pipes, dreams, forgetfulness! Oh, but the thought likes me well!"

"What the devil's the matter with you?" observed Horace, stolidly.

"Come, my boy, don't you know me yet? Tired of doing the languorous. Feeling theatrical, struck by the beauty of Miss Howard's portrait there—anything you like."

"Miss Howard's portrait?" queried Chatsworth, interestedly. "Why, you can't mean that! That isn't like her. It has brown eyes and hair—"

"Bother eyes and hair. It's her portrait, I say, to the life, and, my boy, I'd give a thousand dollars for it, if—"

"If?"

"If I had the money—if—nonsense! Come, boy, don't be slow. Pipes, I said, and opium!"

Chatsworth obediently hunted them out, muttering the while at Courtenay's assertion that the picture was like Joan Howard. The artist did not like the idea.

Robert did not go home that night. The club also missed him. Until early morning he and the bohemian lay coiled Chinese fashion upon studio divans, each with a long, flat-bowled pipe between his lips, and a plate full of soft brown pellets beside him, dreamily watching the myriads of feathery rings floating from his mouth, and wafting away into the dark-

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ness without. Visions, comforting, careless, unreal as the peace of heaven, beautiful as the peace of love, flowed through their brains. Only once during the long hours did they move. This was when Chatsworth, in a moment of delirium, rushed to throw the cloth from his picture, and Courtenay, leaping after him, stayed his hand with fierce reproach:

“Let her be. Let Joan sleep there quietly. Do you think we are fit to look at her to-night?”

CHAPTER XI

THE UNVEILING OF RUIN.

Helen Howard was ensconced in the little room which served her for parlor, boudoir, and dining-room together. Though La Caralita had, under the circumstances, retained an unusually large coterie, still her following was naturally reduced after her retirement from the boards. She was not expecting visitors this afternoon, which was apparent from the fact that she wore a negligé of heavy white silk, that her talented feet were perched on the arm of a chair, and that she was making an unattractive book the excuse for idle and unremunerative day-dreams.

These last had been strange days for Helen Howard, many of them filled with stormy rebellion at her helplessness, and others, as to-day, with a kind of whimsical resignation. Her accident had brought to her some things which she would not have cared to change, and one thing that she was willing to pay heavily for. Gradually her thoughts traveled back along old lines of memory, leading her to live again those months which fancy now made heaven. Her head drooped till it rested on one hand, and the book fell to the floor. She was roused from reverie a moment later by the sound of a thick voice asking for her. Fifine entered from the ante-room, saying, nervously:

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"Mr. Courtenay, Miss Helen; but you ought not to see him."

Helen rose. "You mean he is intoxicated? That is strange. I never knew him to be so before."

Her low-voiced sentence was scarcely finished when he himself entered. It was now six days since Courtenay's interview with James Cantle, and during that time he had scarcely once been himself. All Sinners' was astonished, shocked, and disgusted. There was some little talk of demanding his resignation, but the matter did not come to a head, for Courtenay was too great a favorite, drunk or sober, for that. His wife, who did not see him at all, was in a state of tearful anxiety. Most of the ladies who knew him thought him out of town, the older men were too busy to think of him at all, but Malcolm Van Alyn spent his nights in following this brother-in-law helplessly from one drinking place to another, and his days in alternately concocting excuses for and cursing Courtenay's inexplicable condition. To his credit be it stated that Robert kept as studiously away from his own kind as he could, lying alone during the day in a fantastic hiding-place, and at night resorting to places where he would never be known again. At first he had drunk to drown conscience and fear, for criminality did not sit easily upon his slender shoulders, but of late old habits of college days, when this sort of thing had not been infrequent, had returned to his clouded memories.

This visit to a former fancy was merely the result of an impulse. He wanted a woman to talk to and look at, and she, only, appeared available. So he had

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come, although knowing that he was not sober, but concealing his condition as best he could. La Caralita's attitude toward him—half amazement, half badly concealed distaste, was irritating, but he tried not to show it.

"Si-it down, Hel-e-en," he said, with an attempt at quiet authority. "I wanted to come to see—a—a—you, about s-s-s-something, but I c-c-c-cannot just at present recollect what it was. I have n-not been at all w-w-w-well this week. My head aches to-to-day. I wishshsh that I knew just exxxactly what I ammm, or wish to say, but the fact is ththat grain deal hasss queered me so—you know abbbout that grain sttuff—Stagmar's, you know—don't you, Helen?"

Helen, who had remained standing irresolutely by her chair, gave a slight start at the mention of her husband's name, then sat quietly down. Courtenay did not notice her. His deep, bloodshot eyes made an attempt to open widely, but failed, and a moment later they closed, and he sat in a heavy sort of stupor. Helen leaned over and touched his arm. "You were speaking of Stagmar's grain," she said; "I have not been told the right story. Tell it to me, Bob."

The familiar nickname roused him suddenly. He had heard it but seldom of late. Helen's eyes were fixed eagerly upon him. In truth her husband's name had been like a draught of wine to her, even from this man's lips. Slowly he began to speak, in broken phrases, it is true, but growing more connected and coherent as he continued. Line by line came the story of his great dishonesty, the criminality of it, the necessity for flight some time soon; but worse than

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all, the thing that shot into the woman's heart like an arrow, was the revelation that Herbert Stagmar, the man she loved better now than life itself, was the one who was to suffer, who might be ruined, who surely would endure great loss. At the thought, the face of Robert Courtenay before grew loathsome to her.

"Get up!" she cried, suddenly, seizing the man by his shoulders, "come, get up! I won't have you here, near me! Fifiine, help me! Make him go! Oh, God! Leave me alone—alone to think what must be done!"

Courtenay lifted his head and started to his feet. Fifiine hastened into the room, pale with fear at the tone of Helen's voice. But there was no necessity for force. Robert, casting one look of amazement at the face of the infuriated woman, loosened his grasp on her arm and walked blindly from the room.

With a nervous sob Helen Howard flung herself face down upon a couch, answering her maid's questions and entreaties only with the words that she must be alone to think. Fifiine, the many-handed, was at length called away by the sound of sobs from Philip, the boy, who had been playing all this time silently in a neighboring room. Poor little one! He had need to cry sometimes, for sheer loneliness.

So Helen was left alone to think, and plan she did for an hour, fruitlessly. Then all of a sudden her face grew bright. Quickly she rose and ran to the next room in painful eagerness:

"Fifiine! oh, Fifiine! Order my dinner half an hour early, and I am going out at eight. I must have

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a carriage. Never mind the doctor. I am going, for I must. Oh, my dearly beloved! I can save you both!"

Early on that same afternoon, at the time when Courtenay was driving toward the dancer's rooms, Herbert Stagmar, on the other side of the city, was walking sedately up Michigan Avenue from Washington Park to his own residence. His mind was absorbed in the proof sheets of his last book, which at this moment littered up the desk in his study, and in the first chapters of the new novel begun a few days before. He was behindhand with all his literary work, but this was the most awkward time possible for it to be coming in. His thoughts jumped swiftly to prices of wheat and corn and the fury of the Board of Trade, just as a smart brougham drew up beside him at the curb, and Mr. Van Alyn's top hat protruded from the window as that gentleman exclaimed:

"Hi! Herbert! Going your way, my dear fellow; jump in and let me take you home. I want to talk to you. That's it."

Stagmar accepted the invitation unhesitatingly. He was tired of his thoughts, and bored at the idea of the mile he still must travel at the proper snail's pace.

"Your afternoon drive, sir?" asked the author, as he seated himself.

"Well, no, not exactly. I'm out on business. By the by, it concerns you, too, in a way. It is Courtenay's elevator. We renewed his policy a day or two

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ago, and passing the building yesterday I fancied that it was insured for something over its full value. It seemed rather an unstable affair. Being Robert's was of course all the more reason why I should take particular pains to have everything impartially correct. I'm just running down to look it over. You have grain stored there, haven't you?"

"Yes; rather a good deal. Somewhere around three million bushels. Elevator's full."

"Jove! Have you been down to look the place over?"

"Oh, no. I never do that. My men see to it all. However, I shouldn't care to feel the place wasn't safe. Let me know what you think of it when you get back, will you?"

"Certainly, Herbert, certainly. Or, better than that, come with me and see it for yourself, if you have time."

Stagmar looked at his watch. He had much to do, and he did not wish to do it. "It is rather early," he said, "let me see—yes, Bromler, I'll come with you. I dare say there's nothing the matter; it is only to put off some work that I'm not in the mood for, on my part; so we must believe that the matter is serious."

Van Alyn laughed. "Well, I shall be glad to have your opinion over it. Your wheat was also insured by us, and the entire sum would make an unpleasant hole in our capital were it to go suddenly. We have an enormous business now, though, Herbert. It grows hourly almost. Van Alyn and Hamilton are names well known through the country from Maine to Cali-

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fornia. But our heading will be still prettier when we can make it 'Van Alyn, Hamilton and Van Alyn,' eh?"

"Oh, Malcolm! Is Malcom going in with you?"

"Certainly, Herbert." Mr. Van Alyn spoke with some asperity. "Malcolm is having his fling now, but he is to settle down in a year or so, marry—you know whom, of course—and will then become the youngest member of our firm. Augustus and I are both getting along, and by that time the business will need a young, fresh spirit to invigorate—its policies, if I may be allowed the liberty."

Stagmar smiled with great propriety, but grew sober again rather too quickly. Why must every one always be dragging Edith's tacit engagement into conversation, he wondered. Van Alyn, however, was doing his best to be agreeable, and soon Stagmar forgot both himself and his wife in a most successful effort to be entertaining. Indeed, Van Alyn almost lost sight of their errand in the writer's description of a recent letter from the wonderful little Dutchman, Maarten Maartens. "Her memory" became blended with the blind throngs of the business streets, the wholesale houses, the odor of coffee and spices, the clanging of car bells, and the diminishing roar of less frequented streets beyond. Now at length Courtenay's elevator loomed up before them. The two men alighted at a little distance, and looked up at and around it critically.

"I don't know, Herbert," remarked Mr. Van Alyn, in a more satisfied tone. "Looks pretty solid, doesn't it?"

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"From the outside, certainly," responded Stagmar. "Can we go inside? Have you a key?"

"Oh, yes. I took care to bring one. Here, would you mind unlocking it for me? I must have a look at this section."

Stagmar took the large key, and as the door swung open before them dropped it without thinking into his pocket, where it remained. Now the tremendous interior stretched out before them, the enormous bins reaching over their heads on either side of the narrow passageway down which they walked slowly.

"Big place, eh, Stagmar?" said Van Alyn.

"Yes. Naturally it would have to be. It is rather impressive."

"Not many larger in the city. I've been through nearly all of them, and know the lot pretty well. It used to be one of my duties—in the old days when I was merely Brom—to go around to these places and look them up. Ah! what was that?"

Van Alyn had jumped suddenly as a large gray cat came trotting out of the darkness, brushing his leg and moving unconcernedly on towards Stagmar.

"Pshaw! That creature startled me. Cat hasn't much objection to strange people, has she? Suppose she belongs to the watchman. Courtenay must have one around here somewhere."

"There doesn't seem to be any one around," remarked the author, looking about him curiously. "I had an idea there were generally several people in one of these places."

"Oh, not necessarily—not necessarily," replied Bromler Van Alyn, somewhat hastily. "I believe

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that a watchman is customary, and doubtless there is one at night, if not during the day. How long is your grain to be stored, by the way?"

Stagmar shrugged his shoulders slightly. "I'm not sure. A month or two possibly. I pay down, you know, and sell when I choose."

"Good Lord, Herbert! You are a strange fellow. Where do you get it all?"

"Oh, it about cleans me out for the time being. I've not made a grain deal in nearly two years, you know, and then it grew so big that I had to margin. But I invest little money. I like to handle it."

"You must. But you take frightful risks. Suppose wheat ducked for the rest of the winter?"

"Then, my dear man, bread would come cheaper to the masses, and I might be half a million short, that's all. If it grew more serious I know of certain methods whereby the price can be raised. It is only the resort of extremity, however."

"Then your whole fortune is sunk here, my boy?" asked the other with curiosity.

Stagmar smiled down at his stick, and did not reply, while Mr. Van Alyn, flushing, said hastily, "I beg pardon, Herbert."

They had now reached the far end of the elevator, but their eyes, accustomed to the dim light, were able to distinguish objects fairly well. Van Alyn now mounted the ladder stairway that led to the bins above, in order thoroughly to finish his examination, while Stagmar, not caring to climb about in the thick dust in his Prince Albert coat and light trousers, remained below. Presently, as Mr. Van Alyn was

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disappearing into the darkness above his head, the author perceived the gray cat crawling between his own foot and the side of the nearest bin. He looked down at the animal only just in time to see it leap through a small hole in the bin. In an instant it was gone, but he could hear the patter of its claws on the floor inside. What did it mean?

Stagmar knelt and thrust his hand into the opening. There was a hollow within, how large he could not tell. It was absolutely empty! There was no grain inside—nothing. Just then came Van Alyn's voice from above:

"Good stuff, this wheat, Herbert. It smells splendidly fresh. I have just reached it. You should come up and see it."

Stagmar rose quickly. "It is there, then?"

"There! Why, of course. What else did you expect? Delivered a couple of days ago, wasn't it? It's as dry as possible up here. There is nothing off about the place, Herbert. I can safely say that my examination has been thorough." Van Alyn began his descent. "It is solid, and well cared for. You and I are both quite safe. If three millions is little to you, it is good sixth of our capital, and rather more."

"Is my wheat insured full value, then?"

"Almost. Your men are extravagant, Herbert. It really need not have been so much, and it costs you a pretty penny. However, we have no objection."

"I suppose it is rather unnecessary to insure so heavily," responded Stagmar, with a strange laugh.

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"However, if I do not watch those things closely enough, it is my own fault. And do you know, Van Alyn, it would have been more benevolent in me to have insured with smaller firms? You have enough profit without my ducats."

"You're a queer chap, Stagmar. However, it might not be so benevolent if they should have to pay up three millions out of their small capital some day, would it? Your smaller concerns would go under, wouldn't they?"

"And yours would not?"

The other shook his head. "It would hit us hard. I sometimes think we are fools to take some of the enormous risks that we have of late years. But do you know, Herbert, they constitute our biggest profits, and we have never yet lost by one of them. Yes, three millions would stagger us, but I don't think it could knock us down. We are awfully steady, you know."

They went forward to go out again. The afternoon was nearly gone, and the light failing rapidly. Van Alyn, ahead, stood for a moment in the open doorway. Stagmar, almost in darkness, stumbled against a bit of uneven flooring, and thrust his stick against the side of a bin to save himself. He started upright, and suppressed an exclamation as the sound echoed clear and hollow in his ears. Something was wrong here. It would be impossible to stop now with Van Alyn. But after he had locked the door and was following his friend back to the carriage, he took care to keep the key himself, and so to turn the conversation on their homeward way that Van Alyn

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should not think to ask for it. Stagmar was resolved to look for himself.

Joan Howard was somewhat aggrieved at her father's mood that night. They were to have gone together to a reception and a private view of a water-color collection, but during the soup course Stagmar informed his niece that he would be unable to go. Joan was disappointed. Chatsworth would undoubtedly have been at the art exhibit. And she enjoyed talking with him for the sake of hearing the gruff answers he was wont to give her untechnical questions, and then see the contradictory admiration in his eyes, which would not be repressed. Also Malcolm Van Alyn would be at the reception, and possibly Courtenay too. Courtenay she had not now seen for ten days, nor had she heard his name spoken by any one, and the longing within her to see and talk with him again grew greater every day. Besides these not unworthy reasons, she had been looking forward to wearing for the first time a daringly beautiful costume of her own planning, which—though she would have denied this—had been expressly planned to kill the color of Edith Kent's latest dress. Therefore, in accordance with human frailty, as soon as she had been told that she could not go, she began to long more intensely than before for the questionable pleasures of rivalry and attention. By the time the fish had been removed, and her father was still brooding in silence, the stillness became so unbearable that she spoke out her thoughts, regardless of Stagmar's obvious irritability.

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"Even if you cannot go to-night, I am sure that I could easily find some one to take me."

Her tone angered the author, who had been already sufficiently disturbed by his afternoon's discovery. He broke off a piece of bread and crumbled it before he quietly replied: "It is possible that you might go with any one of half a dozen people. I knew that when I spoke. The fact remains that you will not go because I do not wish it."

Joan looked at him quizzically. She enjoyed quietly positive orders like this. They were akin to her nature, and she did not take offense at them. Her tact came back to her. Her only reply was a tranquil smile, which pleased Stagmar, and smoothed the pucker off from over his nose. Nevertheless, he said nothing, and his daughter felt that it behooved her to continue the conversation.

"Uncle, I have been reading about you to-night."

Up went the author's eyebrows. "About me? How, where?"

"The Evening Post," replied Joan, pushing back her plate and looking up. She was surprised to see him move restlessly in his chair, then say sharply, "Carson, bring me the Evening Post."

Joan was frightened at the dark flush that had risen on his face, and she dared not speak. The writer sat without lifting his eyes, nervously tapping his fingers on the table. She thought that he looked older suddenly. It was a relief when the butler returned, laying the paper on the table. Stagmar snatched it up anxiously, and scanned each headline for some word of abuse or disgrace. Finally, on the

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third page there was half a column about his methods on the Board of Trade. His face changed again, and he broke into a laugh. Joan did not guess the cause of the relief in his face, but believed him when he said smilingly to her:

"Of course, I might have known what it was. I was afraid, my dear, that it was going to be one of those disagreeable criticisms that Hanford is always giving me. A man who lives in an atmosphere of spite! But such, my dear young lady, is the species of fame that I happen to have."

"Nonsense! Does that little Hanford actually pretend to criticise you?"

Again Stagmar laughed, for his heart was lighter. "Ah, Joan, if our Lord and Saviour should be returned to earth again, he would in all probability find himself not crucified, but with his reputation in such a ruin, and so irretrievably blackened by the Baal-fires of our beloved critics that he would either be forced to ascend to heaven some quiet night, leaving his work unfinished, or else confine his society entirely to those characters with whom the Bible expressly forbids us to associate, for he would certainly be at once condemned by our most exclusive sets."

During this speech Stagmar had, with half-closed eyes, scanned his daughter's face, and he had not been ill-pleased at the look which rode upon it as she replied: "I do not see the sense of that idea. Christ did not come to the world to meet Mrs. Kent."

"And does Mrs. Kent not need or deserve reformation, then?"

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"Mrs. Kent must graduate from Dr. Snippington before she can rise to the glory of Christ."

"Verily, Joan, you are more sensible than I thought you."

"Thank you, but Dr. Snippington is fascinating all the same."

Stagmar frowned slightly, as having finished his coffee, he rose and left the table. Joan watched him disappear in the direction of his study, and there was all the worry of the earlier evening in his eyes. Then she walked away to the great empty drawing-room to spend a solitary evening. And she wondered sadly, as she fingered her grenadine evening gown of cardinal and black, why the old simple life that once she had so loved, should have gone so completely from her. Then it was not Bougereau's Cupid that she saw on the brocaded wall before her, nor did she feel the silken Turkish rug beneath her feet. Her eyes rested upon the wonderful Velasquez of Saint John that hung in the chapel near the altar of a little convent three thousand miles away, and her feet trod again bare, clean pine floors. And she beheld the sun setting over the mountains, and heard the silver voice of the convent bell floating out of the scented breeze. Then Joan Howard's great gray eyes were glassy with welling tears, and she had forgotten the reception, and the private view—ay, and for the moment, Courtenay himself. Thus is solitude disastrous to our peace of mind.

Stagmar had work to do to-night, and he left his study for his bedroom after ten minutes struggle with himself to regain full composure. "My God!" he

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cried mentally, his strong face growing white and set, "is that woman to whom I have done no wrong to haunt me forever? Was Kent right in the old days? Should I have kept her? Why did I not? How easy it would all be if my whole existence were not on a groundwork of dread—fear of men and women who are not and cannot be my equals! Strong and steady now, Stagmar! No man but has his load to bear. Yours is light, perhaps."

Stagmar realized that with the life he had led and the work he had chosen, the import of each incident in his obscure beginning was now triply increased in the eyes of the world before whom he stood at this, his climax of a marvellous career. His every outward act was commented upon. How, then, to keep forever the secret of his intricate inner life hidden always from all? The scales of his present fate were weighted by two women; on the one side Helen Howard, his wife; on the other, a slight, veiled figure, that of Edith Kent. He, Herbert Stagmar, stood between, and cried out in helpless protest as he beheld the red-haired one sinking ever lower, slower, heavier in the balance.

To-night the writer had work to do, a startling suspicion to verify or prove groundless. Sternly and calmly he thought over his position, as he changed his suit once more for the old brown tweed and ulster. The brougham was ordered around immediately. He was not thinking of Joan as he hurried through the hall, drawing on his gloves, but his daughter saw him go, and gave no sign. As the wheels of the carriage rolled away from the door she stood already upon the

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stair, listening, and a moment later climbed slowly up to her own room.

Stagmar's coachman was accustomed to curious destinations on these night journeys, but never before had he been told to go to a grain elevator. It was a long drive, and a cold one, and Perkins puzzled in vain over this last eccentricity of his master's until he began to wish for the comfort of James' logical conjectures on the box beside him. But James and the brown tweed suit never went out together, and Perkins was obliged to content himself with stinging his grays sharply with the whip, and then pulling them up hard. It was forty minutes from the time they started until the tall wooden height of the elevator rose before them, and Stagmar leaped to the ground.

"You needn't wait, Perkins. It is too bitterly cold."

"Beg pardon, sir, but we'd better wait. I've the blankets for the horses, and me own furs."

"As you please, Perkins. But it's frightfully cold."

Perkins did not reply, but touched his hat respectfully with his whip, and his master disappeared into the darkness.

Arrived at the door Stagmar had some difficulty with the key. It turned easily enough in the lock, but when turned the door itself refused to open. He wrenched and pulled for some time, and finally in working the key, twisted it back into its original position. Instantly the great boards swung inward before him. The door had been open when he came! There was probably a watchman inside. Stagmar entered

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softly, and closed the catch as quietly as possible. He had no mind to be caught here and make a scene. From one of his large pockets he drew a small dark lantern, which he lighted and closed. Then after listening for a moment he made his way cautiously down toward the bin which had had the hole in it. No sound came from the vasty blackness. No tomb could have been more oppressively still. There could be no watchman in the place. He had proceeded but a few steps down the passage when suddenly he felt it necessary to sneeze. There was no way out of it. A convulsion of the diaphragm is not always to be suppressed. It was a thorough sneeze, an honest sneeze, and it echoed like a deep cry through the entire place. Stagmar stopped, harkening nervously to the dying of the last echo. Suddenly, he never knew just how, a hidden door in the side of the bin by which he stood was flung open before him. There, in the entrance to a small, lighted room, stood Robert Courtenay, his blood-shot eyes staring dully into Stagmar's own, his hands grasping the side of the doorway to hold himself upright. Stagmar had cowered back with the suddenness of it, and a single cry escaped him as he realized the import of the situation.

"My God!"

And "My God!" rang out also from the drunkard's swollen lips, as something like a flame from the smoldering fire of his senses shot through his brain. The crisis had come; Courtenay must face it now.

CHAPTER XII

A MAN AND HIS WIFE.

Courtenay recovered himself rapidly, partly because he had been half-prepared for discovery, and partly because half the force of this blow had spent itself in stunning him into sobriety. He certainly was in full possession of his ordinary senses as, with pallid face, but a steady, ironical smile, he stood one side, and with a slight bow motioned Stagmar to precede him into the strange room. Stagmar, although the first force of astonishment had left him, was still dazed and not thoroughly conscious of the full significance of the matter. As he went into the room he looked about him dizzily. 'What he saw sufficed to make him take in the situation. The place—not small for a room—was frightfully dirty, and contained a rickety chair, a barrel upon whose top stood a half-burned candle, and a pallet of rags in a corner, besides which lay a brandy bottle. Along the floor the writer noticed, with a little shock that drove into his brain, an uneven line of tiny grains of wheat which had fallen from a crack far above his head. The bins had been covered with false bottoms. And this was the place that Robert Courtenay, the fastidious, the immaculate, the man satiated with all the elegancies of earth and hell, had chosen voluntarily as a retreat,

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a hiding-place, wherein, by aid of a drug, he had been able to forget the possible outcome of his detestable theft.

Courtenay watched the other for a moment without speaking, and as Stagmar seated himself upon the chair, threw himself recklessly upon his couch of rags and stared, with the brazenness of despair, into the other's face.

"Well—Stagmar?" The tone was insolent, but Stagmar read, better than Courtenay would have believed, the emotion that it covered.

"I suppose every bin is in the same condition," he said, with a kind of weariness.

Courtenay looked at him steadily still, and nodded, adding: "I had intended to go, to get away, but you chanced upon my game sooner than I thought possible. How did it happen?"

"Merely an accident. How much wheat is left here?"

"A little over two hundred thousand bushels. The false bottoms are in deep, for their purpose," he replied softly, studying Stagmar's face.

The writer scarcely moved. "How much did you make?"

Courtenay hesitated, stirred, and flushed. "There will be a little over fifteen hundred thousand left, after I have paid—everything. My debts were heavier than any one guessed. They had been accumulating for years. Of course, you will have all there is—now. Marie can go home to her father, if she wishes, and there need not be much publicity about the trial if we are careful. I am ready for death, though, if you

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think best. Those are the alternatives—suicide or the penitentiary. I'll take your advice on it. I am myself hardly fit for decision. The last week has rather unmanned me. God!" he shuddered as he finished, and appeared to shrink from himself.

Stagmar did not notice much of the last part of the speech. He was pondering deeply, his eyes were fixed on the flickering candle-flame. His lips moved once or twice, but what he said Courtenay could not hear.

Without, upon his box, Perkins, having covered his horses warmly, was himself dozing under his furs. It was a bitterly cold night, though there was no snow. A fierce northeast wind that blows so constantly in the winter through the city by the lake, moaned and shrieked about the exposed corners of the lonely building. Yonder, in the river, the ice blocks cracked and crunched against each other, tossed about on the roughened surface of the muddy water. Perkins could make himself at home in any locality, and paid no attention to the weather. With the reins doubled neatly beneath his feet, and the robe drawn up high about him, he presently began to snore with pleasant lustiness. His master's business was none of his, but he must not be allowed to tramp for five miles through the dreary streets at midnight on such a night as this, if Perkins and the horses froze for it. The good-hearted coachman was by this time too soundly asleep to perceive that another carriage had driven up on the other side of the warehouse, and stopped there not half an hour after Stagmar had entered the building. From this coupé—a vehicle

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which Perkins might have recognized had he been awake to see it—descended a woman, veiled and dressed entirely in black. As soon as she had alighted the carriage drove rapidly away, leaving her standing alone before the structure which at this moment sheltered her husband and her husband's friend and betrayer. In her left hand Helen Howard bore a short stick with a knob at one end of it.

Before the door La Caralita paused. It was too dark for her to distinguish clearly the outline of the door, and she was not sure of her locality. Now, for the first time, she perceived the other carriage. At sight of it a slight exclamation escaped her lips. The coachman sat immovable, his head drooping. Still she hesitated, then went forward uncertainly. Her plans were upset. This proof of another person's presence was a grave annoyance. "Could Bob have taken it into his head to come?" and then she shook her head dubiously. "Not in another carriage. Besides, he could not be so reckless. I wonder if that man will hear—"

Perkins stirred slightly on his box. Helen shrank back, unwittingly, full against the door. It gave way behind her, and only by good luck did she escape falling. As it was, the faint creaking of the unoiled hinges seemed to her as loud a scream. At any rate she stood within the building, and gently she closed the door behind her. A dim light came to her eyes from down the passageway in the room where the two were talking. For half a moment she sank down in a dark corner, overcome with fear, excitement, and bodily weakness. Breathlessly she listened.

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From the direction in which the light came proceeded also the sounds of two men's voices. Even at the distance, the woman's heart within her quivered at the tone of one of them. She was certain it was Stagmar's. Could her husband at that moment have seen the sudden light in her eyes, and have known the thought that had brought it there, would he not—ah, no! Mortal eyes cannot—will not, perhaps—read the page of Nature's book that lies nearest them. For mortality is a foolish thing, that loves to strain its vision with attempts at piercing into the invisible, but cares naught for those wonders that lie straight before it, to the right and left. All-wise Herbert Stagmar refused to learn this lesson until it was—well, late at least. But to return.

At the sound of his voice Helen Howard rose slowly, lithely, almost unconsciously, and began to creep by painful inches nearer and nearer toward the light. Just by the corner of the second bin, where Courtenay's door had been cut through, a cross passage ran. Here, in a small hollow diagonally opposite the door, beyond which she could see, Helen placed herself. It was an excellent hiding-place, for one would have passed her by without seeing her, yet to her the interior of that strange room was almost entirely visible.

La Caralita could barely see her husband, however, for he was sitting by the farthest wall, only just within her range of vision, and the side of his face was toward her. But Courtenay lay straight before her on the pallet of rags, and she could note every expression that crossed his finely featured face.

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So the dancer, while the night went on, lay flat upon the dirty wooden floor, faint, ill, but true always to herself, listening with eager joy to the words of the man whom now she regarded as something far beyond her world, yet making all her life for her.

Stagmar was speaking, and Helen knew the look that was upon his face and the deep, vibrating tone of his voice as he said:

"Bob, what am I to do?"

Courtenay gave a little cry that was half sob, as he asked faintly. "It—it's finished you absolutely, Herbert?"

"Absolutely," replied Stagmar, indifferently; "but it is also a nuisance to think that I have sold the wheat."

Courtenay leaped to his feet, with lips as white as his cheeks.

"Good Lord! I thought you had a corner on it, and that there was no telling when—"

"Be quiet, Bob. I hadn't intended to sell so soon, but I was offered a large price for it yesterday, which I accepted. But I can get out of that. I have not been paid. Now sit down again and keep cool. It is not going to better matters by being dramatic over it, and I want to be eminently sensible. I must think for five minutes—I can't tell—just what effect—" The sentence was not completed, but the author bent over the barrel, resting his head in his hands. Stagmar did not look at Courtenay. From her hiding-place Helen Howard watched the figure of her quondam lover with eyes fixed in dread, and her lips sealed through fear for him. Without looking up

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Robert quietly drew from his hip-pocket a small object whose steel barrel caught a quivering gleam from the light of Stagmar's open lantern. Then, with a strange expression in his eyes, Courtenay thoroughly examined the thing, and saw that it was loaded. The woman tried hard to speak, but was helpless. Courtenay cocked the revolver. The almost inaudible click did not move the author. The other watched his face intently, and with his left hand unfastened the remnant of soiled collar that remained about his neck. Then taking the weapon into his hands he looked up, as though wishing to speak to his companion. At last he said in a strained voice, "Herbert—I'm ready if you wish it."

Stagmar lifted his head, then rose to his feet, took the revolver from Courtenay's unresisting hands, unloaded it, and flung it to the floor. "Did you wish me to be arrested for your murder?" he asked in an ironical tone. Then, sitting down again wearily, the writer paused for a second, and began gravely to speak.

"My question to myself, Robert, was as to whether this step of yours would do me personally harm or good. I have arrived at the conclusion that it will be good; not, of course, very pleasant, but still good. I shall merely go back again to the beginning that I had left behind, forget the lotus-eating that I have been doing too much of lately, and return to honest labor. The blow does not strike me as it might most men, for after many years of the study of humanity I have arrived at the conclusion the stimulus of poverty produces the best work, and also the most satisfactory

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content. Of course, not desperate poverty, by any means, my house being quite a fortune in itself. I can handle millions no more, but the picture that I paint of the future is not unattractive.

"Now, you, Bob. First of all give up silly ideas of penitentiary and suicide. There will be neither trial nor exposure. Keep what you have made, and start with it. You think me à fool? Oh, no! I am not a fool. Only you will please stop attempting to drink yourself to death, forget this little project of yours against usual law and order, come back to society, and be again what you were born for—a gentleman. In the real sense of the word I am not a gentleman, Bob. This business shall never be known except to ourselves, and possibly the Messrs. Cattle—eh, Courtenay?—and I will see that no one does ever know. This wheat shall be sold in Europe. The present negotiations are to be broken off—and we are settled."

Courtenay rose drunkenly. "Herbert, Herbert, I don't understand. Are you making game of me?"

"I am going to drive you home just now. We may as well get out of this hole, which, by the way, must be walled up. Come, you will realize better after some sleep to-night."

Courtenay's mind was a chaos of many things. One idea presided over all. Stagmar seemed to him a God, who looked on things in the light of a God who knew of others so much fairer that human delights were nothing to him. In a dim way he realized that his nightmare was over, that peace of mind could be his once more. That was all. He followed Herbert blindly out into the night.

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And in Stagmar's great heart there lay but a little shadow of regret. His spirit rejoiced at his success as he twisted out of the old candle the last spark of light, and slowly led Courtenay out of the room and down the chilly passage. It was his one triumph, this progress from door to door, for, as he passed, a woman, she who had done him wrong, had caused his greatest sorrow, crept forth from her hiding-place and, though he saw it not, pressed her lips to the spot his feet had pressed, leaving there as consecration one glittering tear—the tear of a remorse greater than aught that he had borne for her.

The two men passed out into the square, where, in the chilly starlight, Perkins awaited them sleepily. Courtenay made no objection to going home. At this hour I doubt whether he would have had a word of astonishment or of gratification at his command if finding himself within the gates of the Celestial City. He could realize nothing more acutely. So, without being conscious of what he said to Stagmar on parting from him, only knowing that his hand had been heartily wrung, he found himself entering his own doors with steady steps for the first time in a week. His man, who had been all this time keeping up a discreet and faithful watch for him, met him at once, looking slightly relieved and also surprised that he was sober.

"Mrs. Courtenay is—a—not at home, sir."

"No, certainly not, Williams. I was—er-r-r—what was it?—not expecting to see her until to-morrow, perhaps. I must go now to my own rooms. You may come to me immediately, Williams. I shall want

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to bathe and get to bed. And—here—Williams—” A look, together with a bit of crackly green paper thrust unostentatiously into the valet’s passive hand, finished the sentence. Williams bowed politely. He had, of course, expected the tip—why else should a man take the trouble to stay up and watch for a dissipated master?—but all the same he could be properly grateful.

An hour later Courtenay sank back into his white, pillows with a long groan of absolute relief that the nightmare of his life was over. Of the future he did not think. Stagmar had said it should be well.

Yes, Stagmar had said it should be well. But in every matter of life somebody must shoulder the responsibility, be it light or heavy. In this case, as in many, the writer bore the burden. And as he drove rapidly toward his own home he found this weight becoming heavier with each clack of the horses’ hoofs on the asphalt. So long as he had had Courtenay, desperate, half-mad before him, he had himself borne up by the very force of those arguments which he had used on behalf of the other. But now he was alone, face to face with unveiled Calamity—and her features were unbeautiful and hard. Stagmar found that he was but human, quite human. With deepening gloom he saw his way stretching out before him, once again dark, blank, and comfortless. The mile-posts that dotted it from side to side being called failure, poverty, and disgrace. They were white as the unseeing faces of former friends. And worse than all—worse than loneliness and despair, was the thought that there were two women whom he did not love dependent upon him for their bread of life, who

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were bound to him by the strongest ties that man can be held by, and the thought of whom was now intensely disagreeable. Never before had he acknowledged to himself that he did not like his daughter—the daughter of that wife who had debased his own self-respect; now he passively accepted the fact. It was that imprudent early marriage that was responsible still for all his greatest mental suffering. Everything—everything in the world—might have come to him had he but been free, untrammelled, able to rise as he would, fearlessly. In misfortune, in happiness, in honor, or unpopularity, this thought was always the first to come, the last to go. Poor Helen! Well for her own peace of mind that she did not know all. And at heart the writer despised himself for it, and one thing more. Impossibly, hopelessly, inexplicably, but none the less mightily, he loved the child of his old friend, Edith Kent.

On reaching his home Stagmar did not go to bed, but remained in his study, pipe in mouth, the diabolical Magdalene behind him on the wall, his mind filled with conjectures, plans, and stern realizations. Dying ambitions faded before him, and he mourned them as already gone forever. A picture of the life of a literary hack rose upon his morbid imagination. And then at last his Fates grew kinder to him, and he slept.

Now to return to the elevator. Helen Howard at last found herself alone, unseen, unheard, within the dismal depths of the vast building. She was scarcely nervous, for she had a task before her which love and fear made easy. Feeling her way to the door she opened it wide, and then in the frozen

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ai. made her way back to the room which her husband had left. In the corner where lay Courtenay's heap of dry rags she knelt, and from beneath her cloak drew the stick she had brought and a little box. A soft scratch, a snap, and a match was alight. Trembling with eagerness she held the tiny flame to the tarred head of her torch. Instantly it blazed up. With a quick, sharp breath she thrust the fiery thing deep into the mass of ready tinder. For half an instant she stood watching the sheet of flame that rose up and spread among the rags. Then with a little cry she turned and fled into the windy night, leaving behind no trace of her presence save the faint perfume from her loosened hair. The dancing fire was left alone to do its work of glorious destruction. In fifteen minutes the whole side of the wooden building was a wall of living flame, whirring in shining scrolls far above the lofty cornice. Ten minutes more and the square was ringing with the clanging of fire-bells, neighing of horses, the short commands of firemen, and alive with a quickly collected crowd, glad to warm themselves at this mighty bonfire which mingled with its smoke the foul odor of burning wheat. The fire-chief mopped his brow and shook his head at the sight.

"No saving that," he remarked. "Ripley, take your men and look to the next building. This wind may play the duce with us."

Stagmar was still sleeping at seven the next morning. His awakening was sudden and peculiar. Courtenay was shaking him by the shoulders and crying to him joyously.

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"Herbert! listen! Bert! Wake up here! It is all right. Do you understand? Everything is all right! Providence was in it, my boy!"

"Providence in what? Eh! You, Bob! What do you mean? What did you say?"

"Here, just read that, Herbert Stagmar!" handing him a morning paper, with a black headline on the first page. "Read that!"

"'Burning of Courtenay Elevator—Totally Destroyed—Large Insurance—Interest to Board of Trade Magnates—Herbert Stagmar—Wheat—'" Stagmar, still half blinded with far-away dreams, could not instantly grasp the situation.

"My elevator, *the* elevator was burned to the ground last night. How it happened God knows. But it is gone, every trace of it, they say, and—there remains the insurance. You and I are going to stand again!"

"Courtenay! It would be virtually a swindle. I cannot have that. The truth must come out—"

The look in the other's eyes stopped him. "No; you shall not do that. I deny everything. Let the dead past bury its dead. Who will witness to the lie that would send me to state's prison?"

Stagmar leaned back in his chair and looked earnestly at the younger man. Courtenay's eyes met him straight, and his face never changed. In a moment the writer rose slowly.

"I see," he said, "and I understand. Your Fates are kind to you, Robert Courtenay."

CHAPTER XIII

THE INDISCRETION OF YOUNG VAN ALYN.

There was a good deal of talk among city men concerning the tremendous loss by the great fire to the firm of Van Alyn and Hamilton. The insurance men were severely censured for their extreme recklessness in sinking so much in one venture, and at the same time Herbert Stagmar was highly commended for his leniency toward them in the payment which they owed him. People also called Stagmar a lucky dog to have had his wheat so heavily insured, and the information was vouchsafed that he had always fallen upon his feet, forgetting in their solemn wisdom that when people tumble from a considerable height and land squarely on their feet the result is apt to be concussion of the brain, in lieu of broken limb or rib. Figuratively speaking this had happened to Stagmar, for a heavy conscience is as bad as a light pocket. But what was he to do?

Bromler Van Alyn took the loss keenly to heart, feeling that the blame of the imprudence rested upon him, and for some time he was unapproachable on the subject to every one save Stagmar. His recent inspection and satisfactory report about the building, and—though no one ever spoke of it to him—the fact

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that his son-in-law was owner of the elevator, filled his cup of professional bitterness to the brim. By his own firm he was completely exonerated. He was known to be too upright a business man by far to merit the slurs cast upon him by newspapers and petty would-be rivals. Nevertheless, the great firm kept its head above water only by a hard struggle, in which Stagmar's leniency proved an untold assistance.

The day after the disaster Mr. Augustus Hamilton sat facing his senior partner in their private office. The worthy Augustus was in an exceedingly grave humor.

"We must be given a little time, sir," he had remarked, on an average of every half-hour all day. "It is preposterous, preposterous!" he said, irritably. "Who ever heard of anything like it? The risk was altogether too great. Not that the firm could fail. Who has dared say that, Mr. Van Alyn? But we must be given time—time, sir."

From his corner of the office Van Alyn shook his head despondently. "Stagmar is badly off, I'm afraid. I believe he had everything there—"

"Badly off! Mr. Stagmar badly off, with something like two millions of money coming to him within six months? Nonsense, sir! Within six weeks we can begin payments, perhaps sooner; but our investments must be entirely overhauled, and many of them withdrawn. That will take time. Mr. Stagmar must be willing to give us a little time."

"I—I will myself go to him, Augustus. Perhaps to-day."

"Really? Ah, that is good of you. Only let it be

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soon, my dear fellow. The sooner the better, Bromler."

It was a mighty effort for Bromler Van Alyn to make such an offer, and his partner knew it. Van Alyn had the reputation of being the stiffest-necked business man in the city. As he never asked a favor, so he never granted one. Thus for him to go now to Herbert Stagmar, whom he had often accused of being careless about these matters, was a piece of self-abasement truly remarkable. Van Alyn, when his mind was made up, however, lost no time, and five o'clock that afternoon saw him, immaculately dressed, ringing at the imposing door of the author's residence.

Stagmar was at home. He had been in the house all day. His early interview with Courtenay left him in an unusually bitter mood. It was the first time in his life that he had felt himself helpless in a matter concerning his own honor. But he *was* helpless. Courtenay's eyes had told him that. Naturally Herbert did not know of the presence of his wife at that nocturnal interview, and had he been aware of her subsequent action, the matter would only have become more difficult for him. As matters now stood he could do nothing but let them work themselves out. In reality he was the one innocent person in the affair; he was also the most wretched over it. Therefore, when Mr. Van Alyn was announced, he felt far from easy over the subject of his call.

If Stagmar were embarrassed when he sat face to face with his visitor at last, Van Alyn himself was more so. He coughed hastily and cleared his throat

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several times in succession. Finally he darted with commendable speed into the midst of his plea.

"This is a business call, Herbert, concerning, as you will readily surmise, the disastrous fire of last night."

Stagmar bowed.

"Naturally you will understand that the fire has occasioned a serious outlook for the firm of which I have the honor to be senior partner. You may also understand my strong feeling over the matter in the face of my recent examination of the place made in your presence."

He paused for a moment, as if hoping for a word of assistance from the other, who still gave no sign.

"The place being that of my son-in-law's, I feel that I stand in a most delicate position, although having met only with the greatest consideration from all my friends."

He paused again, and the writer impatiently flicked a bit of dust from his cuff, and tried to imagine what Van Alyn was getting at. After a second the older man drew a sharp breath, and began again to speak in a voice quite off key from profound emotion.

"Our firm being in fact grievously straightened for money at this time, I have taken upon myself the duty of coming to you to ask, to implore, your clemency in regard to our payment of the debt we owe you. What we ask is the grant of a little more time than is customary with us in such matters."

It was out. Poor Van Alyn twisted as uncomfortably and grew as red as though he had requested Stagmar to make the firm a present of all his property.

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It is impossible to realize what an enormity this mild requirement seemed to so punctilious a man. To his incredible surprise Stagmar suddenly burst out laughing.

"Why, certainly, Van Alyn. Certainly, my dear sir. As much time as ever you like. A little each six months until the thing is paid, if you like. I understand your position exactly. Not a word! Why it is a matter of entire indifference to me so long as I keep enough to live decently upon and have a suit of clothes on my back."

"Dear me, Herbert! You mistake us! Six months for the entire amount is all that we could demand of you. By that time every cent shall be held to your credit in the First National Bank."

"Take the Illinois Trust, my dear fellow. It's a prettier building. I suppose there are papers and things to be looked over?"

"Certainly. We should like an appointment with you at our lawyer's, say to-morrow at ten?—and I am to understand that you grant the six months?"

"Certainly, of course. As many months as you like. And now that we have finished the business—oh, yes, I will be there at ten to-morrow—let us go into the drawing-room, where it is less smoky. It is my da—my niece's reception day." Stagmar had caught himself just in time, but a spasm of fear lay at his heart. Van Alyn, however, in his relief, noticed nothing.

"My dear sir, I trust that Miss Howard will excuse me to-day. I am hardly fit for a correct call. A—you will, I am sure, beg her to excuse me. I have an

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appointment very soon. Permit me, then, to thank you a thousand times for your leniency. I—"

"Tut, man! Not a word. Sorry you cannot come in. Good-by."

As Van Alyn disappeared under Carson's protecting wing, Stagmar turned hastily and went to join his daughter in the drawing-room. He felt an extreme distaste for solitude suddenly. To his relief he found Joan alone.

At his entrance the girl arose quickly. "Father, I'm so glad you are here at last! I was almost ready to beard you in your den! I want to speak to you, and you have kept alone so all day that there has been no chance of looking at you. It is a shame!"

"Yes, yes, my dear. What is it that you want?"

"It is about the Brent's to-night. You could not go with me last night; will you not lend yourself as escort this time?"

"Am I asked, my dear? I fancied it was one of those dancing affairs, solely for young people."

"No. It is a 'conglomerate.' Everything for every one. I have your invitation. You told me to accept for you at the time."

"Did I indeed? How frivolous I must have felt. Very well, we will go. But I insist, Joan, upon going at ten and leaving by one at the latest. The usual hours I do not approve."

Joan looked at him with some words on her lips, but forbore to speak them. He caught her glance, though he paid no attention to it. A moment later he was obliged to rise from the comfortable chair into which he had sunk, and make his escape before the

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entrance of some ladies who might not have been charmed to see him in an old velvet jacket and disreputable slippers.

Joan spent the rest of the afternoon in great content. If Courtenay were anywhere he would be at the Brent's, and Courtenay, it appeared, had become essential to her happiness. His ten days of absence from the ordinary haunts of society had caused her unusual anxiety, the more so because she had sense enough not to mention him to any one. She had never yet derived very great satisfaction from his presence, yet she felt it something gained even to look at him. She dressed carefully that night.

At precisely a quarter to ten the brougham stood at the door, and Stagmar waited courteously at the foot of the stairs with an unusually large bouquet of violets in his hands. He never omitted this little attention.

When at last she came down her father forgot his impatience and feasted his eyes upon her, smiling with pleasure at her appearance. Somehow Joan appeared now more like a happy, bright-eyed girl who simply looked forward to the dancing and the frappé than he had ever seen her before. Whether it was her unusually simple gown of white net, or her almost tender mood, he did not decide. But for the first time it was a pleasure to wrap her about in her white mantle and hear the genuine words of thanks for the flowers. He sighed peacefully as he sat down by her in the carriage.

Such scenes as this were, unfortunately, uncommon between Stagmar and Joan Howard. Their life to-

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gether was not what the writer attempted to make it. Had Joan been spoiled in the experiment? Was her head turned by position? Was she too much flattered, or was it simply her nature? A combination of all these things, or none of them? I cannot answer you in any wise save this: that already at seventeen Joan's whole bearing and manner was that of a four years' débutante, one as assured and as perfectly at ease with all save one as Madame Van Alyn herself. And whether this came from nature or from transition, I cannot myself say.

They were sufficiently early at the Brent's, which Joan saw with but little satisfaction. Stagmar, absorbed in conversation with a talented young editor, failed utterly to notice that there were no more than thirty people in the room. The cotillon was not ordered till twelve, and up to that time there was merely informal dancing in the ball-room, which Joan did not enter for some time. She preferred to remain in the drawing-rooms, where she might watch unnoticed for the arrival of the one person in the city with whom she desired to dance. Courtenay did not come. It was already past eleven. The girl was angry and unreasonably mortified. She was at length forced to grant young Van Alyn's request for a waltz, but even then it was only with an effort that she kept her thoughts fixed upon her partner.

Nevertheless, the Courtenays were coming to the Brent's. Marie Van Alyn, who had never been called a very intelligent woman, had, since her marriage, developed a certain character, or rather a pathetic kind of tact. It lay in her never-ceasing endeavor to

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conceal her husband's many weaknesses, and above all his careless neglect of herself. Had Mrs. Courtenay cared less for the man whose name she bore, she would doubtless not have troubled herself to hide the unfortunate termination of her career as a society belle. Courtenay never abused her, was, in a way, proud of her perfect manners and clothes, but for the rest totally indifferent. Marie spoke of her secret trouble to no one, not even to her mother. As a result of her heart-eating the greater part of the world thought them a devoted couple. And for this reward Marie could not make too great a sacrifice.

But never before had Courtenay so disgraced his name as during the last week. Though she did not see him at all, his wife felt an actual terror at being in the same house with him. On the day after the fire she knew that he spent the day at home, and his valet hinted discreetly to her that he was quite himself. Therefore she sent word to him courteously that she was leaving for the Brent's at half-past ten, and to her great delight he returned answer that he would accompany her. She began her toilet that evening with the lightest heart she had borne for many days.

As her husband got into his evening dress he wrestled more violently with remorse than with his collar, which was refractory enough also. And it was with something like dread that he at length stood before his wife's door, the memory of college scrapes and the head professor's study, a day after, returning humorously to his mind. But this matter was harder to bear, for Marie would probably not scold. With a

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deep breath he turned the handle of her door and entered the dressing-room softly. She stood alone before the dressing-table, fastening her diamonds upon the shoulders of her gown. Courtenay cleared his throat, and spoke her name in a tone so low that it was strange she heard it. Turning with a little exclamation, and reading his expression, she held out her arms unsteadily, and he went to her almost tenderly. Together they forgot the ball for some time, and this was how Joan Howard waited in vain for the arrival of Robert Courtenay until twelve o'clock.

Miss Howard danced twice with Malcolm, and then two or three times with others of her admirers until at length she dropped into a chair beside Edith Kent, who was for some reason alone. Joan, seeing this, drove her own escort laughingly away. Young Van Alyn, who stood on the other side of the room chatting indolently with two or three non-dancing men, found himself confronted by this agreeable and unexpected sight. The two young women had entered into an animated conversation, in which Joan's versatility of facial expression gave her something of an advantage in appearance over her colder companion. The contrast was great and unfair. At heart Edith was truly noble; Joan Howard probably was not. Something about the younger girl was undeniably fascinating. From across the great ball-room, with the dancers continually shutting her off from his sight, young Malcolm Van Alyn nevertheless felt his blood grow hot and his hands tingle merely with the sight of her moving lips and the glorious hair which flashed at him defiantly. At length, during the long strains

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of a rare waltz he lost himself utterly, and, actuated by a rash impulse, made his way rapidly over to her and carried her off from the very arms of young Garth, who merely gave a mild whistle at this unusual discourtesy, and turned immediately to Edith, who was watching her old-time cavalier with an unwonted look of displeasure in her eyes—displeasure, and something else—could it have been a strange soft of satisfaction? Edith would not have cared to know, as she floated off with the adroit Garth, that one person in the room had watched the entire scene and analyzed it all. This was Eleanor Felton.

Meantime Joan and her partner did not long continue their dance. There are some moments when it is unbearable to move sedately round and forward and back, when there is madness in the mind and a bursting fullness in the heart. To Malcolm this was one of those times, and without even asking Joan's leave he led her from the ball-room into the short corridor approaching an orchid house, which was unlighted for the evening, not having been intended for use, as was the large conservatory. Only the lamps from the rooms outside stole dimly in through the glass. There was no one in the place when they entered, save one of the gardener's assistants at the far end, who escaped as rapidly as possible after a single peep at the beautiful lady in white.

For a moment or two the pair wandered idly among the palms and hanging baskets of rare flowers. In the midst of the foliage a tiny artificial fountain pattered its drops tinklingly into the small marble basin. This was the only sound to be heard. Joan, who was

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not in Malcolm's mood in the least, felt ill at ease and awkward.

"Do sit down, Miss Howard," he said at length, flinging himself at the same time onto a little rustic bench, and never for an instant removing his eyes from her.

Joan heard him impatiently. She was waiting an opportunity to get back to the drawing-room. Ah! perhaps Courtenay already had a partner for the cotillon. What a foolish, tiresome, nice boy this was!

"Why?" she asked, in a fit of sudden petulance. "Why should I sit down?"

"No, no. Do not sit down," replied Malcolm, hurriedly. "Stand just as you are now, with your face half turned away from me."

Joan faced him promptly, but, taken aback at the look in his eyes, moved undecidedly back to her old position.

"I've got something to say to you, Joan, something that I can't keep from you any longer—that I don't want to keep from you any longer."

The small doorway into the orchid house was darkened by the figure of a man, but neither one of the couple perceived him.

"Joan, you must know what I mean by this time? Surely you understand. I love you, Joan. How could I help it? Somehow you are all my life. I never for one minute felt toward any other girl what I always have for you. Will you marry me, dear? I love you so entirely, so devotedly, that you must surely return it a little. Joan, will you be my wife?"

The form in the doorway moved slightly.

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Joan herself was surprised. She had never been asked in marriage before by any man, and she had never thought of it or expected it, least of all from Malcolm Van Alyn. She felt no emotion at the question beyond a little pleasurable excitement, but for the moment she did forget Courtenay, the man in whom she had been so entirely absorbed that the possibility of loving any other; or marrying another, had never crossed her mind. When Malcolm had finished speaking she turned and regarded him in silence, astonished to see how white he had become.

"Malcolm," she said at last, in a very low voice, "I cannot answer your question just now, because I had never thought of your asking it. You must give me a little time. I do not know what I shall say—it is so strange to me—but if you could come to me—to-morrow—in the afternoon, I will try to let you know. You must let me go now. Good night."

Swiftly she turned from him, and as she crossed to the door, some one stepped rapidly and noiselessly within, and drew out of sight in the shadow of the palms. Joan left the room, and Malcolm, half-dazed, rose quickly to follow her, when suddenly, to his utter astonishment, Herbert Stagmar seemed to rise from the floor and confront him. He had no time to be angry, for the older man, laying his two hands quietly upon Malcolm's arm, said earnestly and kindly:

"I heard it, my boy, but it was chance, not intention. Nevertheless, it is well that it happened so. Do not be nervous over this affair. You shall have Joan, Malcolm Van Alyn. I believe that you really want

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her; therefore, to-morrow afternoon, my niece shall plight you her troth."

Malcolm grasped the writer's hands in an ecstasy. He did not ask how Stagmar could speak so surely, and if he had thought of it he would not have spoken, for if it were false hope it was at least too good to relinquish at once. Would there have been any question in Stagmar's own heart had he seen Joan's expression at this moment? She was entering the ball-room on Robert Courtenay's arm, her heart and eyes burning, Malcolm forgotten. Courtenay was talking lightly to her in his usual way, making love to her simply by the touch of his fingers, a melody in his voice, the deep interest in his eyes. Ten minutes before he had been pleading with his wife to dance the cotillon with him herself for the evening, and at her laughing objection had said two or three words to her in his low, vibrating voice that had brought tears of tremulous happiness to the unselfish, foolish little woman. Happy Marie! The Fates must have loved her in the end. But Joan Howard might not have been so well pleased had she known of that little scene. However, it never pays to study these many-sided people too earnestly. One generally finds more than one looks for or cares to discover.

The cotillon was a great success. Half against his inclination, Malcolm stayed to dance it. He would have given much to have been alone to think for a little—a thing which he had not done to-night. But he was obliged to stay. He had engaged Edith as his partner the day before. So entirely preoccupied was he during the first half-dozen figures, with

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Joan, who sat near him, that his embarrassing relations with the girl he had expected to marry heretofore never occurred to him. When at length he did realize it he literally started. In point of fact, his words to Joan Howard had been the result of an ungovernable impulse. The spell which her presence threw over him had always been powerful; to-night it had reached its height—the height he had often already both dreaded and longed for. His passion for her had long been the most powerful thing in his life, and even now, in a comparatively cool moment, he cried out angrily to himself in vindication that he had a perfect right to marry a girl whom he loved. Stagmar himself knew his relation to Edith, yet he had offered Joan to him. "These prearranged alliances are absolute nonsense. Edith cares no more for me in that way than I for her. I will not have it. I was right not to feel bound. I must be right; I shall be right."

So he spoke angrily to himself, but it was still not remarkable that he was not happy, as Edith, at the head of the chain, took his hand with that cold, grave, beautiful, indifferent smile, and led him calmly round without looking into his face.

Miss Howard remained until long past one, but her father made no difficulty about it. He sent word to her when he left that her maid would return in the carriage for her, and that she was under the care of Miss Felton until then. Stagmar went to his club for an hour, and was in the house to meet his daughter as she returned. He had not been in such good spirits for months. To speak honestly, young Van Alyn's

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proposal had somehow seemed to kindle the whole horizon of his life with a glorious sunset fire. A load of tons was removed from his shoulders. The many intricacies of many matters understood by him alone seemed suddenly solved by this one act. To-night Herbert Stagmar could retire and sleep with mind and body alike at rest.

At ten minutes to three Joan entered, radiant and sleepy, with vague dreams of Courtenay, not Malcolm, filling her fair head. In the hall her father, still in evening dress, met her. He laid one hand upon her shoulder, and looked straight into the eyes that had so often baffled him.

"Joan," he said, in the voice that was unapproachable, "when Malcolm comes to-morrow you are to have 'yes' for his answer. Do you understand, my dear?"

Wonder and anger both stood on her face; then a kind of gentleness took their place. She said nothing, but Stagmar, satisfied, let her go. That morning it was Joan who lay sleepless. Restlessly, excitedly, she tossed and turned in a fever of wakefulness. Her great eyes stared into the darkness, and would not be closed. Her lips moved slightly at times, and tears burned into her pillow. Just as day began to steal in through her windows she rose from her bed, and crossing the room, fell on her knees before her unused shrine. No prayer came from her lips, but her heart felt much, and the dress that she wore that morning at an unusually early breakfast was a queer little old-fashioned one of black, which had been lovingly put

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together by those old-time nuns who lived down in the land of the setting sun.

Stagmar was surprised and not ill-pleased at a speech that she made at breakfast: "Father, do you suppose that next summer we might go away to some quiet, old-fashioned place, where we could go to bed at nine o'clock every night and breathe fresh air all day?"

"Can it be possible that she is finding it out so soon?" thought the writer to himself, but to her he answered, with a cynical laugh: "Your complexion is perfectly good yet, Joan. Have no fears."

Never in his life had young Van Alyn spent so perturbed a day as the one following the Brent's ball. It would be trite to describe all the useless agonies of hope, fear, doubt, and despair that he went through in the staid offices of his father that morning, and just how long it took him to accomplish his toilet at noon, and how many minutes he hovered around the vicinity of Stagmar's doorstep before he had courage to enter, at a surprisingly early hour. All that it is necessary for us to tell is the fact that when he at last found himself within he discovered Joan in the little reception-room near a samovar, and when he entered she greeted him calmly. He sat down, feeling utterly forlorn, but in another moment Joan Howard had looked him honestly in the eyes and said quietly:

"You have come for an answer to your question, Malcolm? The answer is, yes."

We here follow Stagmar hastily into the study.

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He was satisfied. Are not we? No article that he had ever written gave the great author more complete satisfaction than the four-line notice that he read next day:

"Mr. Herbert Stagmar announces the engagement of his niece, Joan Howard, to Malcolm Van Alyn of Chicago."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE HEART OF A DANCER.

Upon the night of her criminal act Helen Howard reached her apartment alone, on foot, faint, weary, but not frightened. Nay, her heart rejoiced deeply at the deed which, in the eye of the law, is a crime and subject to a punishment only short of death—of course, always provided that the criminal is discovered. The law does not often admit the motive for a crime as an extenuating circumstance. Most certainly La Caralita's reasons would have held not a feather's weight with the conscience of a self-respecting jury. Love and law would be a curious team. And yet is it possible that the human love of one for another, even though it be blindly followed, holds not one end of a chord of sympathy that stretches out and up to the great fire-heart of all-love? If not, then let our love be given to weak humanity or the Devil, for they will be worthier than the God men worship. Somewhere there must be love for love, and where that land lies there was Helen Howard's heart. She knew no God, and prayed to none, like Herbert Stagmar, whom she loved indeed. Her priests and saints, madonnas and confessionals, were not so dear to her as the husband whom she only appreciated when she had lost him. Helen knew

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that now she had lost his affection. The very kindness in his sad eyes told her that, for she remembered how once those eyes had burned for her.

And Helen Howard was woman enough to believe that if she had lost his love, it could only be because some other woman had gained it. Who that other woman was La Caralita guessed, and guessed wrongly, of course. But a torrent of bitter jealousy swept over her uncontrolled. She watched her husband from a distance, closely, and being far-sighted, saw much. The much was enough for her to twist wrong into right with great success. Indeed, this was unavoidable, for how could the dancer from her place realize the breadth of a soul like Herbert Stagmar's? He was beyond her, and thus, judging from her own standpoint, it was the woman of whom he saw so much, whom he so continually visited, that he loved; she who looked at him sometimes in the way that a woman looks at only one man—Eleanor Felton. She knew nothing of Edith Kent—did La Caralita, and had you whispered it to her the dancer would have mocked you scornfully:

"That thing!"—pointing. "That great, pallid, yellow-haired statue! *That* woman after *me*!"

And verily if you then turned to look at her, this tall, magnificent, dark-eyed body of nerves, with hair the color of sin—you might have marveled with her at the turning of men's minds.

Helen, born and bred to the life of a lower plane, was one to whom a certain kind of love was a necessity. The craving had been instilled into her from infancy; was she so much to blame? Oh! Christ

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suffered on the cross to regain heaven. But have not two-thirds of those whom He exhorted suffered as much, only to have their souls damned in the end? Men still say that He died to save the world! Whom in the world did He save? Men! men! Is this your religion? For me, I love and pity my Helen and those in life who are like her, as much as Roman Catholics must a new-born babe, who, having died without the sacrament, is condemned to punishment forever—why? And if I, who am only mortal, can feel so much for these poor wretches, think you that God, whom they call all-merciful, can feel none? There. My benediction on you now.

Helen Howard returned late that night to Fifine, who was irritable with anxiety, and, retiring, slept the sweet sleep of—the criminal (?) far into the morning of the ensuing day. When she had been awakened and laboriously dressed, preparatory to a visit from the doctor, whom she dreaded this morning, and while she played a little with her Continental breakfast, she asked irritably every five minutes for the morning paper, which was late. At length Fifine put it into her hands, and was slightly surprised that she did not turn at once to the theatrical columns, but rather pored devouringly over an “extra” which recounted a big fire. Fifine had herself run it over while bringing the paper up, and had found neither lives lost nor any hair-breadth escapes of firemen from flames—nothing, in short, at all engrossing to the feminine mind. It was almost all business, concerning insurance and many stupid things. Why, then, did the ex-dancer read straight through the article,

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him, but for the keeping him in life to lead the pitiful existence that he does. Think you that if his choice were given him, and he could comprehend its import, he would not rather choose death than the life—which has fallen to him?"

Stagmar, as he finished this speech, buried his face in his hands with an inaudible exclamation, while his wife, who had risen nervously at his words, stood gazing at his chair in misery. Finally, seeing that he neither moved nor spoke, she knelt before him and put both her hands lightly on his arm, "Forgive me," she whispered.

Instantly he shook her off, then looked up. "I was wrong to have spoken," he said, steadily. "You cannot grasp my meaning. I wasted words. It is no matter. Thirty-eight years ago you may have been like him yourself—perhaps. I was thoughtless. For a minute or two my own babyhood came back to me." (Helen, woman-like, winced a little at his mention of her age.) "But wouldn't it be possible for you to put something into this boy's life? You know how you have treated him hitherto."

"But Snippington was worse!" she cried out passionately. "He took away what the child most cared for. The boy has a—a heart-breaking voice, Herbert."

"We were not speaking of Snippington," he said, shaking his head. "The conversation is not profitable. Let it pass. Tell me now of yourself, Helen; whether there is anything you want; then I must go."

"No, no! You are not. You shall not go so soon! Why, I—"

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But Stagmar put her aside again, this time rising. "I have occasional reports of you from Kent. He says that you are gaining rapidly, except that you are too restless."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I'm not sick," she muttered, but the other did not heed her.

There was a pause, and then suddenly Helen remembered herself. "Herbert, will you please tell me something of Joan, of our daughter? I have scarcely seen or heard of her for the last month."

Stagmar glanced about the room and picked up a paper. Hunting rapidly through its columns he finally handed it to her, pointing out one announcement. It was the notice of her engagement. "Is it possible that you did not see this?"

Helen read it through with a gasp of astonishment, and her eyes shone triumphantly. "Is it true?" she asked, quickly.

Stagmar nodded.

"Ah, what a great man you have become! To think that you could do even this!" Then, pleadingly: "Herbert, Herbert, may I not see her, my girl, just once? Only a single time, now. Could she not be brought here, if only for five minutes, so that I can see the light in her face?"

Stagmar slowly shook his head. "It could not be done without seriously compromising her. You know that. I am truly sorry to refuse. But you might do this: she is going to-morrow to Snippington's church with young Van Alyn; go there yourself to see her—provided you do not permit yourself to be recognized by any one."

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Helen was looking at him with a little quivering about the lips. "Of course," she said, sadly, "Malcolm Van Alyn is not a Catholic."

Herbert started a little. "You, Helen, you never had any acquaintance with Malcolm, surely?"

"Acquaintance? Yes, perhaps. But do not fear, Herbert. The boy is honest. How you distrust me! Do you think that I should be glad to have my daughter marry an unworthy man?"

"I beg your pardon, Helen."

"But Joan will lose her religion then, when she marries?" continued the woman, insistently.

"Has that creed done so much for you, Helen, that you should dread to have another live outside its superstition and degeneracy? No; Joan will not lose her religion then, for if she ever had any it has already gone from her. But believe me, I influence her in no way. She may have the two ceremonies if she wishes. I myself, as you know, acknowledge no belief. I am what men call atheist. Now I have been here for a long time. I have an appointment in a few moments. Go, if you like, to St. Matthew's to-morrow. Good-by for a few days."

"Just one moment, Herbert, then you may go. You said—said to me a few moments ago that Joan—would be compromised if she were to come here. If that it so, it would be the same with you. You might be talked about, Herbert. So do—not—come to—see me again. I should not wish it. I do not need you. Your reputation is too high for that." She stood quite still before him, her eyes on the floor.

Stagmar looked into her unconscious face with

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more feeling than he had exhibited at all before. Stepping forward he took one of her hands in a close grasp.

"Until January, my dear, *au revoir*," he said, and an instant after was gone.

Drearily Helen returned to her window-seat. It had been such a failure, the end of this great hope of hers. Only his words at the last, which had come as an utter surprise, consoled her a little. The day without was gray, cold, and snowy. She had sent the child and Fifine into it, and for what purpose? That *he* might be given an opportunity to talk to her in a way which cut her to the heart. And then Helen began to think of his words and the truth that lay in them, as he had intended her to do. Fifine did not return with the child until afternoon, as she had been instructed. When he came in the boy seemed quite happy, but at sight of his "mother" the look of age and dread so usual to the child-eyes returned to them again. Helen saw the expression with a little pang, and she called to the boy, gently. "Philip, come to me: let me fasten your tie."

And when he had timidly approached, expecting an impatient word, she stooped suddenly and kissed his rough, soiled little cheek.

The child was astonished, and did not take the matter gracefully. However, he did not rub off the salute, and later, when he was washed, he did not howl at all, perhaps because he was more carefully handled than usual. But a little after, when Helen asked him if he would go to church with her to-morrow, one small lip quivered pitifully, and he stam-

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mered out to know if there would be singing. "Yes," was the answer. Then came a wistful question of the eyes, a slight shake of Helen's head, and Philip answered, "Yes, please; I will go."

Snippington insisted upon a very high-church service at St. Matthew's. Beyond the difference in the language used at mass it was almost precisely similar to the Catholic form. The Reverend Titus liked to wear his gown and surplice. He thought them becoming, and his eyes would go up a sixteenth of an inch further when they were on.

Most of the congregation arrived some half hour after the voluntary. Chicago people consider it distressingly bad form to be prompt anywhere. Punctuality seems to argue that you are not so busy that you can only do a little bit of each duty that you are expected to perform in the day; and to be everlastingly rushing about is the supreme end of every good citizen of the Windy City. Helen ordinarily conformed to this fashion, but to-day, for some personal reason she chose to be on time. By good fortune, Courtenay, who happened to be one of the ushers, was there when she arrived, and in response to a certain little smile, gave her, with Philip, a seat on a side aisle very near the front, and near those pews occupied by the Hamiltons, Courtenays, Van Alyn's, and Kents. She was, too, directly in front of the reading desk, which was the real reason why the facetious Robert had seated her so. The daring fellow smiled to himself at the prospect of something more than ordinary amusement at this day's service. On entering their pew, Philip's eyes flew instantly to the empty

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choir seats, at which he gazed with a look so pitiful that Helen touched him lightly on the shoulder and whispered encouragingly to him.

Continually during the first half of the service the church echoed to the rustle and clatter of the arriving congregation. Helen, who was veiled as if in mourning, scarcely took her eyes from the Van Alyn pew, which was still empty. A dread began to form in her heart lest Joan should not come. But she did come, and almost at the moment when her mother despaired. She was triumphantly late, and made something of a sensation in her costume of bright blue and white, her graceful head crowned by a blue toque, a delicate white prayer-book in her hand, as she stopped in the aisle, just beside Helen Howard. She was followed into the seat by a good-looking young fellow with crisp brown hair and pleasant blue eyes which continually followed his companion in the most open admiration. "Miss Howard and young Van Alyn" were the murmurs that followed the pair down the aisle and fell pleasantly on the girl's ears, even as she bowed to the chancel. And Helen, whose eyes were misty behind her veil, also said proudly to herself, "Joan, my daughter, and Malcolm Van Alyn."

And oh, how Joan had changed since last her mother had seen her! But that had been a very long while ago.

La Caralita seldom lost control of her tenderer emotions, and she now quickly recovered herself. Prayers had been read, and the congregation arose for the hymn. Helen Howard, with whimsical anger, at sight of the holy Titus Emollitus, determined to dis-

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pel his composure for the morning. Quickly removing her veil, she stooped toward Philip, whispering, "Do your best now, my dear, you know the hymn." And as innumerable hymnals were opened she saw the child's face light up with keen satisfaction. During the first verse, however, Philip, through some little shyness, did not open his lips. The choir took up the first words of the second: "Give me a sober mind, a self-renouncing will." Suddenly, like a gleam of the sun off a piece of steel, a voice shot up from the midst of the congregation that caused half the choir to stop and listen, and every head to turn to the spot whence it rose. It was a boy's voice, a high soprano, cold and pure as Carrara marble. Philip's little face was uplifted; he had forgotten everything in his long-delayed freedom. Helen looked down at him and then up toward the pulpit, and had difficulty in restraining irreverent laughter. At this moment the Reverend Titus Emollitus Snippington presented a curious and remarkable spectacle. At the instant that the first note of Philip's voice sounded through the church the rector had shot one glance to the spot where stood the woman and the child. Once was enough. He did not look again, but stood shakily at the desk, with his moving lips and his delicate cheeks of so brilliant a crimson that the effect with his black gown and white surplice was both unusual and effective.

Although to most of that audience the little scene consisted of a tiny boy with a marvelous voice and a young and very beautiful woman who appeared to be his mother, while the rector, by a coincidence totally

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unconnected with the affair, seemed to be having a serious rush of blood to the head, there were still one or two persons who quietly understood and maliciously enjoyed it all. Of these, one was Courtenay and another was a woman, Eleanor Felton, who had come to-day to the church she so heartily despised to see Helen Howard.

To Joan that beautiful voice brought back with vivid force the memory of long-past days of girlhood. She fell into a revery so deep that it was not until the sermon was well begun that she thought to look around at the child who had sung. Philip had long since settled back into his place, and was now drowsing quietly as the young lady glanced unobtrusively over her shoulder. Instantly she was bolt upright, only her head drooping, not a particle of color in her cheeks. She had recognized her mother.

Half an hour later the aisles of the church were an inch-moving mass of people. Joan and Van Alyn were directly behind Helen Howard and the tiny singer. Actuated by a sudden impulse, Joan touched her mother slightly on the shoulder as Malcolm stepped back a little to talk to a friend. Instantly Helen turned her head with a nervous little twist, and she grew strangely scarlet as she saw the delicate white glove held out to her, and a faint smile on the lips of Stagmar's child.

"I beg your pardon," said the dancer, softly and coldly; "there must, I think, be some mistake."

A little farther on Malcolm and his fiancée encountered Mrs. Kent and her daughter. Malcolm's boyish face flushed sharply as they came in sight.

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Mrs. Kent scarcely bowed to either of the pair. Edith's greeting was more gentle, but very brief. When they had passed Joan glanced quickly into her companion's face, and noting its expression she sighed and turned away her head. A great social triumph—and triumphs bring moments that are indeed bitter.

As regards Snippington, I confess that the hour he had just endured would seem to excuse in him some degree of wrath. And just so much as this, and possibly a little more, the Reverend Titus Emollitus indulged in during the afternoon. How he blasphemed and how he raved, and stamped about his rooms! And what horrible vengeance he vowed against the woman! And yet all this tempest in a teapot could neither remove from his conscience the image of his ugly sin, nor yet make his admiring landlady relinquish the idea that the poor doctor must surely be in that state of transfiguration sometimes reached toward the end of a protracted meeting.

CHAPTER XV

EDITH.

Three or four nights before the church episode, Edith Kent was sitting alone in a large chair before the library fire, running carelessly through the pages of the Evening Post. In scanning the society column she came upon a short notice that made her suddenly start up with puckered brows. She turned undecidedly toward the hall and the stairs, then sat slowly down and read the notice through again. This time a quick flush spread over her face, and she gazed moodily into the fire. She was still in that position when her mother came down very beautifully dressed for the dinner to which she was about to depart.

Mrs. Kent entered the library and stood looking imposingly at her daughter:

"My dear, you are to be unspeakably dull here this evening, I am sure. It is really sad that you regretted the Torringtons after all. Still, it is an excellent thing for the complexion to retire early occasionally. You will pardon my saying that you have not been quite so fit as usual of late. Ah! The carriage is ready. It is twenty minutes to eight, is it not? Just fasten this lace, my dear, and do not displace my hair. That is it. *Au revoir*, Edith. Come, James!"

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They were gone. The sound of their carriage wheels passed up the avenue. Edith sat down again beside the fire to think. Her head whirled a little with the suddenness of her discovery. Mrs. Kent had not read the Post this evening, and Edith was glad of the respite given her before her mother should find what she had found. Again she turned to the paper, still willing to believe that it might be a mistake.

"The engagement is announced—" The sentence blurred before her eyes. Joan Howard and Malcolm! Edith had sometimes imagined her own name in that place, never doubted that it would some day be there. And now she had been intentionally, absolutely disregarded—no, call it by its real name—jilted, by her old-time playmate! Edith said these words over to herself, and turned a little white. She was angry. Aside from the wound that Malcolm had given her by his unexpected action, the fact that the other woman was Joan Howard made it worse for her. Edith Kent had never permitted herself to think much of Joan Howard's identity, for her suspicions were not worthy of herself, and they did dishonor to the man who held the highest opinion she was capable of bestowing on any one—Stagmar. But Edith could not like the younger girl. Their natures were so utterly different, their lives led with such different motives, that no true sympathy ever could exist between them. And more than this, Edith distrusted and did not respect Herbert Stagmar's niece.

With the thought of Stagmar came another attitude of mind. She knew that for the past year her own

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manner with Malcolm had been so full of careless indifference as to have excited comment. And this manner had not been assumed. She had never said openly to herself, "I do not love Malcolm Van Alyn," simply because it would have been ridiculous. Edith Kent never had loved Malcolm. She had always regarded him as a nice boy, whom she could count upon for anything, who danced remarkably well, and whom she should some day marry. The little romance that was in her nature had of late months been expended on another and totally different kind of person, whom she called Mr. Stagmar. The confession might as well be made immediately that at times, when she was quite alone, Edith forgot her calm pallor and had thrown as much scarlet intensity as the dancer herself upon the silent air, into the one word, spoken lowly, "Herbert!"

After this admission to herself, Edith could not feel any serious pain of loss at the news of the engagement. Indeed, for a moment there was a sense of freedom, as of a sudden release. She could feel as she liked openly now. But again, a moment later, the sense of her wounded vanity and mortification swept over her, and she stared gloomily into the dying flame, trying to trace Joan Howard's features in the coals. This was an interesting if unprofitable amusement, and so deeply was the young lady engaged that she did not hear the sharp ring at the door, nor the butler as he came through to open it, but was entirely surprised when Gilbert brought her a card bearing Miss Felton's name.

One hand went to Edith's hair, the other to the

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back of her waist. Then she passed swiftly into the great half-lighted drawing-room.

"Oh, Miss Felton, so pleased to see you! But don't let us stay here; it is too dreary. I am quite alone to-night, and was dozing by the library fire."

"Thank you; I should be glad to go there. A library is my natural lair, you know. Oh, I shall be quite at home here." And Eleanor smiled rather amusedly to herself at the "library," which consisted of two rare little mahogany bookcases filled with Weyman, and Doyle, and Hope, with a slight sprinkling of Thackeray and Dumas, merely for effect. Stagmar's books, magnificently bound, and entirely unsoiled—for Edith had her own set of those upstairs—also occupied a conspicuous position. There were in all perhaps eighty volumes.

Eleanor Felton was very simply dressed, and she smiled brightly at Edith as she said: "I was counting upon finding you alone; you see I knew that your father and mother had gone down to the Fellowship, and as there was almost nothing else going on, I had hoped you would be at home."

"As you see. Now you are to accomplish the charitable work of saving me from solitude." Edith tried hard to make her tone thoroughly cordial, but it did not ring quite true. For it was not wonderful that the girl heartily wished to be alone at this time, and was also more than a little uneasy at the object of Miss Felton's call. She had never regarded Eleanor as a gossip, but she did dread her keen eyes and her sarcastic spirit.

It had needed no word on Edith's part to make

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Eleanor Felton cognizant of Edith's mood. Nay, Eleanor had counted upon this, for she, with the rest of the world, had read her Post that evening, and had had the temerity to do what fifty others, actuated by a different motive, had not dared, but strongly wished to dare. Eleanor had the idea that the blow might have come hardly upon the girl, and, on this solitary evening, called with the sole idea of drawing Edith's thoughts away from herself. Now that she was here she found it more difficult to do than she had anticipated. Edith's manner puzzled her. She had not thought of being misjudged, and now deemed it best to let Edith herself choose the topic of their conversation. There was something of heroism in the girl's calmness when at last she did speak.

"You have, of course, heard of Malcolm's engagement, Miss Felton?" Edith was grasping the bull by its horns somewhat savagely.

The speech made Eleanor nervous, even while she marveled. "Oh, yes," she responded, with pleasant indifference.

"It could hardly have surprised most people," went on Edith, in a voice that quivered never a hair's breadth. "Miss Howard is so very attractive, and Malcolm has been devoted to her for so long. I shall tell him that it was love at first sight."

"I know that, too," replied Eleanor; "but I had not an idea that Malcolm was serious in any of it. It has always seemed to me that for the last year or two the boy has been studying girl-natures for his own amusement, and has gone from one of them to another

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like a butterfly to flowers. I have always enjoyed watching him."

"And he was doubtless studying me, too," added Edith, cold with anger.

"You, Edith!" cried the other, starting at perceiving how her sentence had been interpreted. "A thousand times no! You were the one being to whom he was always the same, to whom he always returned with the same quiet devotion after each of his wanderings. It proved how unfavorably all others compared with you. Speaking the truth to you, Edith, from the bottom of my heart, I believe that the boy has made some childish misake. If he proposed to Joan Howard it was in a fit of hair-brained enthusiasm over her magnetic beauty. The girl has a peculiar grace about her, you know, which attracts men for the moment, as Malcolm was attracted. And now he cannot draw back. I am bitterly sorry for him."

"You are not just to Joan," said Edith in a low voice. "She is, as you say, supremely attractive to men, but she can also hold their love, I think. Besides that, she is Mr. Stagmar's niece."

"What's that got to do with it?" cried Eleanor, brusquely. She had been astounded at the dignity of tone in Edith's last phrase.

Edith, startled, remained rather awkwardly silent. And Eleanor, seeing it, asked herself, "Is it possible?" Miss Felton sat watching the younger woman curiously. Edith liked the expression in her eyes. Eleanor's lips parted, she hesitated for a second, and then the question leaped out impulsively, "Edith, did you care for Malcolm Van Alyn?"

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Miss Kent drew a quick breath, but she was neither surprised nor angry. "Really, Eleanor, I don't know. It has been a mortification, a relief, a sorrow, and a joy by turns. I have felt glad to be free, sorry that I have lost my brother. I do not suppose that I cared for him at all as I should." She finished with a regretful smile.

"Then," continued Eleanor, now unconsciously bold, "do you care for any one else?"

"Oh!" Edith rose to her feet, her face scarlet. "How dare you—Eleanor? Nay," mockingly now, "truly, Eleanor, I do not know!"

Miss Felton laughed in a relieved way, for she suddenly realized the liberty she had taken, and she had no desire to forfeit Edith Kent's friendship. But Edith's answer had been such a mixture of anger, confusion, and self-possession that Eleanor was now curious in earnest. However, the girl would have no more manœuvres, and hastily turned the subject. During the rest of the call conversation strayed through oft-trodden, sandy paths, and at half after nine Eleanor gathered her heavy wraps once more about her and said *au revoir*.

Passing out to her coupé, Miss Felton did not notice the sturdy figure of a man loitering aimlessly about, only a few paces from the steps of the Kent's house. Truth to tell this person had been wandering chillily around the immediate neighborhood for the past half-hour, watching with a considerable degree of impatience the carriage that still stood immovable before the entrance. As soon as Miss Felton had driven away the fellow went hastily up to the Kent's

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door and put his hand to the bell, drawing it away again before he had rung. He stepped back and glanced once more, apprehensively, up at the towering stone front. From one of the upper windows a light gleamed suddenly forth. At the same moment those below went out. The man sighed, shook his head, went down the steps again, and then turning his coat-collar up about his ears, strode hastily off down the street. Poor Malcolm! He had not dared.

Edith had gone to her room, and it was the light from this window that had sent the erratic boy away in despair. She had prepared herself for bed, though it was early and she not in the least sleepy. Sitting before the dressing-table, her white gown falling in classic folds from her neck to her feet, her long fair hair bound in a heavy braid, the brush idle in her strong hand, Edith fell to musing. Her eyes rested upon a large photograph of Malcolm. For a moment she regarded it angrily. Then her face grew quizzical. Leaning over, she took the picture from its place, and began thoughtfully to study its features. It was an open young face, and not a weak one, taken altogether. Looked at piecemeal, the hair was thick and crinkly and rather closely cut, the brows were straight and earnestly drawn, the eyes slightly too far apart, the nose short, the mouth beautifully curved, the chin small and firm. Edith studied it until the corners of her mouth began to twitch, and she broke into a low laugh, exclaiming aloud: "Oh, Malcolm! My dear Malcolm! You are so very young!" And then as her face grew grave again, added, sadly: "You would have been good to me, I know. And of the other—

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oh, there is no possible hope! But, as I love you both, God bless you!"

All through the next morning Mrs. Kent was unreasonable and thoroughly trying. At the dinner last night the engagement of Van Alyn to Joan had been discussed before her in the direct presence of Stagmar, thus making a single sweetly detrimental word on her part utterly impossible. Mrs. Kent's anger at the matter knew no bounds, and as her night had been sleepless, by morning her pent-up rage could find no method of adequate expression. She would not speak on the subject for fear that uncontrolled emotion might bring out many long-delayed wrinkles, but there are methods of showing displeasure that will not cause wrinkles—on the face. Therefore, it was with a breath of polite yet intense relief that Edith beheld her mother finally rustle into the stiffest of brocades preparatory to a luncheon, to which she at length departed, leaving Edith to entertain three uninteresting guests. By four o'clock the girl was at liberty again, and then, yielding to a sudden impulse, she departed to call upon her—rival, Joan Howard, to whom she had already ordered the costliest of Sèvres teacups to be sent.

At half-past three on the same afternoon Herbert Stagmar finished a long and exhausting day's work at his desk. He was wretchedly tired when at last he felt that he might push away all the papers, throw his arms lazily above his head, and saunter away from his hot study to the large spaces of the drawing-rooms, where Carson met and saluted him respectfully.

"Where will you have luncheon, sir?"

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"Luncheon? Ah, that sounds good, Carson. I believe that I have not had much to-day beyond a lemon or so. I'll lunch in here, Carson."

Carson left the room bowing unobtrusively, returning not long after with a large tray, covered with the peculiar conglomeration of dishes which the butler only knew how to prepare for the eccentric taste of his master.

"Where's Miss Howard?" queried the writer, making a fierce attack upon a breaded cutlet.

"Miss Howard is not in, sir. I believe she is making calls."

Stagmar poured himself out a glass of claret and seltzer, and muttered something unintelligible.

A carriage rolled up to the door. Stagmar went to the window, a buttered roll in his hand, and peered out unostentatiously. He saw Edith Kent within the coupé, saw her hand her card to the footman, who ran up the stairs, leaving the door of the vehicle open.

"Carson!" called Stagmar, hastily, as the butler passed through the hall to the door. "Carson! Miss Howard is at home. Miss Howard is in my study. She will receive Miss Kent there. You understand?"

Carson's brows twitched as he replied without a particle of surprise in his voice, "Yes, sir." But in his own mind he casually asked himself, "What in the devil is Mr. Stagmar up to now?"

That question of Carson's Stagmar himself might have had some difficulty in answering clearly. He stood by the desk in the study, his fingers tapping nervously on the wood, on his face a peculiarly jovial smile that had shone there rarely since the days of his

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Bohemianism. In fact this unreasonable action was a relic of those old days when he, and Kent, and Chatsworth had been wont to play their pranks together. And yet there was something a little more serious in it. He thought that in a moment Edith would be coming to him there, and at the thought his eyes grew gentle.

"Miss Howard is in," said the footman, and Miss Kent, a moment later, was received at the hall door by Carson, who bowed solemnly.

"Will you be so good as to go to the study, madame. Miss—Miss Howard is there." We trust that the Recording Angel did Carson justice for that unwilling lie.

"The study?" asked Edith, a little puzzled.

"Yes, Miss Kent. This way, if you please."

Having ushered the young lady to the closed oaken doors, Carson, the faithful and forbearing, quitted the scene of interest, and departed to his own quarters, leaving Edith to hold whatever opinion of him that she liked. However, Edith Kent was able to open a door for herself, if Miss Howard chose this unconventional mode of reception. Besides that, she was glad enough to see the study—his room—for once. The handle of the door turned doubtfully. Stagmar, within, drew a quick breath; then—they stood face to face. Again Herbert thanked his rising star that his daughter was not at home.

"Miss Kent?" remarked the writer, in an inimitable tone of surprise and courteous welcome, albeit a thread of something slightly warmer crept unconsciously into it.

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"Mr. Stagmar!" responded Edith, aghast.

"You wished to see me?" he inquired, politely.

"To see you? Oh, no! The butler informed me that Miss Howard was here. I wished to see her." The tone was haughty now.

Stagmar raised his brows. "Some mistake, I am sure. Miss Howard is, I believe, herself paying visits. I am exceedingly sorry. But you, Miss Kent," as the girl instantly began moving toward the door, "since you are here, make me, instead of my niece, a little call. We bachelors are so sadly devoid of privilege in that line. Really I have always thought that the ladies took pleasure in neglecting us. Come now, prove my accusation of your sex false."

Utterly unconventional, even improper, as was the proposition, Stagmar's tone was so engagingly persuasive that Edith smiled in spite of herself. Now Stagmar very well knew that Edith Kent had never done an imprudent thing in all her life. And perhaps this freak of his was as much an experiment as to his power of attraction as anything. If so, he must have been flattered by his success. How am I to explain why Edith, as he pushed toward her an easy chair and smiled charmingly into her eyes, sank slowly and with scarce perceptible hesitation into the leather depths, a faint tinge of pink in her cheeks, a tiny sparkle in her eyes, and the still lingering smile on her classic lips?

"Do you know, Mr. Stagmar," she said, when he had seated himself near her, unconsciously leaning over toward her that he might lose neither tone of her voice nor expression of her eyes, "do you know I

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have never before been in this room where you work, and where the public which doesn't know you thinks of you as being always?"

He laughed genially. She was losing much beside her mere formality of manner; she was opening to him, and oh, how well it all became her! "And you, who do know me, know also that I do my duty by this room very ill indeed. Are you aware besides that I love to leave work behind me that I may come into the land—where you dwell?"

Strangely enough Edith was not embarrassed. She was sure that he had spoken so to no woman before, and she was glad at the thought. Her face flushed delicately as she answered him.

Leaning far back in her great chair, and looking at him out of those coldly blue eyes that had suddenly grown warm and dreamy, she spoke, and in her voice was the language that every man and every woman speaks once at least during life: "Tell me—tell me about your life, about how you live within yourself. How do you plan work, and when do you do the best of it? Your own life must be unusual. You are not really the Mr. Stagmar who is serious at dinners, brilliant at receptions, witty at afternoons, and severely solemn at balls. I should like to know *you*. After you have told me, I must go."

"So soon as that!"

"Have you so little to tell?"

He looked down into her smiling face, and resolved that it should not be little. Speaking rather slowly he began to talk to her of his everyday life, of how he toiled and idled, meditated, thought, and listened,

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regretted deeds, or was satisfied with them, was melancholy or gay, as his mood seized him. It was only the story of the life of every thoughtful man, but told so well that it appeared far more. He omitted the somberest and heaviest passages, the times when he was at his greatest, when, as seen from the commonplace present, he appeared to be filled with great mental anguish, when the strain of concentration was so powerful that, to him who looked back on it, it was too terrible to recount to his girl. In the beginning the listener had hoped for and expected a tale of an unknown wonderland of thought, but before her human hero had finished speaking she marveled that she could have imagined anything to be better than this simple recital of a great human life. As a matter of fact, the tale was by no means simply told. Stagmar was not talking now to an Eleanor Felton, to one who would not be caught and held by any glamour of words. Nay, the highest art of the story-teller was thrown into his speech, and the result was the world picture of a simple subject painted in colors so masterly, so harmonious, so striking, that it is little wonder that I, humble disciple only of the art of which Stagmar was master, cannot lay the same before you.

As it was, when Edith rose, the brilliancy of her eyes, the color in her cheeks, and the smile on her lips as she held out her hand to her host, told him that his success with truth had been as great as he could have hoped.

"You have done me a great deal of good," she said. "I had expected to hear of great storms that

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you had passed through in life, but on the contrary I find that the calmest and most undisturbed passages through the world are those that in the end can be called truly great. I am very glad that I stayed. Good-by, and thank you."

Was it strange that Stagmar did not smile as he touched her outstretched hand lightly and let it go?

"I—I have an apology to make you, Edith." There was a half-smile now round his lips, as, leaning over the arm of a chair, he looked at her.

"An apology? What is it?"

"When you came this afternoon," he said, hurriedly, "I knew that Joan was not at home. I was tired and alone. You were the person whom I should most have desired to see. When you actually came I—I told Carson to send you here. I took a liberty. Will you forgive me?" Had Stagmar carried his experiment too far at last?

Edith flushed in extreme anger. "You need hardly have humiliated me by telling me of it, even though you had planned it all. It would have been perfectly simple to have let it pass as an accident."

"Simple, yes. True, no. I have no desire for you to hold me in a false light. I am, as you see, weak. With any other woman it would have remained an accident. With you—Edith—I could not." He was very grave as he came toward her to open the door. Without a word she passed through it, and then, with a quick breath that might have been a sob, she turned.

"I forgive you," she whispered, and this time, as Stagmar took her hand he raised it silently to his lips.

CHAPTER XVI

THE UNEXPECTED THAT SOMETIMES HAPPENS.

Courtenay, in full evening dress, lolled impatiently in the pretty little parlor of his own house, waiting irritably for the appearance of his wife. She was, of course, late. The carriage had been at the door for fully fifteen minutes, and Robert the Careless was becoming seriously annoyed. "What in — can she be doing?" he muttered, kicking over a tiny gilt chair that weighed two pounds and had cost ten. Almost at the same moment Marie's maid hesitatingly stopped in the doorway.

"I beg your pardon, sir. Mrs. Courtenay thinks her cold is too bad for her to go out to-night."

Courtenay looked at the girl for a moment without speaking. He did not care to show wrath before servants. Then, rising, he strode up the staircase three steps at a time on his way to his wife's dressing-room.

Marie was quite dressed, and she was leaning back on a couch, struggling with a pair of gloves. She certainly did not seem well, and yet when she did not cough there was nothing serious in her appearance. Robert looked at his wife's pallid face and dark-circled eyes with a gentler expression.

"We've got to go, Marie," he said, shaking his

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head. "You won't take any more cold with a high-necked dress on, I fancy. I'm sorry, but you know it would be deucedly impolite to them. Foreigners are easily put out, you know, and the Count lost fifteen hundred to me last night. Really, you must brace up."

"We're late, I'm afraid. Put my cloak around me, Bob. I probably shan't know the Countess. It's ten years since I saw Ethel Adams." Marie spoke with an effort. An unusual lassitude was stamped upon her face.

"There, by Jove! You're right enough now. You can't get cold with all that over you. I never knew the Countess. She was from San Francisco, wasn't she? They're going on to visit her family. Want to borrow from them, I dare say."

Mrs. Courtenay only nodded as Courtenay closed the carriage door. She did not care one way or the other about the matter. She supposed that it was quite right if the Count chose to lose his money to Courtenay. As her husband remained silent her thoughts turned again to herself. She really did feel unable to move to-night. It had only been fear of offending her husband that had caused the weary woman to try for a few hours more to endure the weight of her clothes, the straining agony of her incessant cough, and the heavy pain in her head.

At the theater they were to meet Mr. and Mrs. Van Allyn, whose guests for the evening were the Count and Countess de Ferrincour.

"What's the play, Marie, and who's to be there?"

"I don't know what the play is, something short,

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I hope. And as to the party, I believe it is only the six of us. One box."

"That's right. These big parties at a theater are disgustingly vulgar, I think. One always feels like a West-sider, and generally there are too many women, and you talk to four or five at once."

Marie laughed a little for no particular reason, and then coughed until she was utterly exhausted.

It was an unusually long evening after all. The play, "The Princess and the Butterfly," was in five acts, and seemed endless. Mrs. Courtenay was even more intensely bored than she had feared to be, and so ill that during the intermissions she scarcely spoke to the little dark-visaged Frenchman, who tried assiduously to be polite, and did not seem to mind her continued monosyllables. He understood those at least. Mrs. Van Alyn was worried over her daughter's pallor, but could say nothing before the guests. Courtenay and Mr. Van Alyn were both trying to entertain the Countess, who was a quiet little thing, rather carelessly dressed.

Before the play was over they left by unanimous consent. Even then it was late. Without it was a typical Chicago winter night,—damp, cold, windy, a driving, half-frozen sleet filling the atmosphere chokingly full. At the Auditorium supper was served them. The three men drank rather heavily, and the three women looked bored, did not touch the food, and made no pretense at talking. It had not been a successful evening. When the party broke up Mrs. Van Alyn drew her husband one side:

"Bromler, it doesn't seem right to me for Cour-

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tenay to take the Count off to the club again: Marie appears to be really ill. Will you speak to him?"

Bromler frowned, but went over obediently to his son-in-law and spoke to him in a low voice. "Oh!" said Robert, and crossed to his wife, who had just finished saying good night to the Countess.

"By the way, Marie," said her husband in a careless tone, "you've no objection to my taking Ferrincour round to All Sinners' to-night, have you?"

Marie looked a little astonished, then glanced at her mother, who was watching them. "No, Bob," she said a little wearily, and so drove home alone.

Only once during the long ceremony of preparing for the night, under the hands of her maid, did Marie speak. That was when her hair was taken down preparatory to its usual brushing. "Braid it and let it go to-night!" she exclaimed, and then sank again into passive indifference.

When finally Katie saw her lady in bed, Marie lay back on the pillows just as she had flung herself there first, her lips white as her garments themselves. The maid examined her anxiously. She was an elderly sort of person, and had been in the Van Alyn family for many years.

"Miss Marie, hadn't I better send round for Dr. Kent?"

A languid opening of the eyes and a faint "No; you may go now."

Kate shook her head, nevertheless, as she left the room for the night.

Courtenay came home at something after four. He was in a very good humor, being another thousand

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in pocket. Indeed, he had spoken truly when he told the Count how he regretted the departure of the latter for San Francisco the next day. But at the hour of the morning Courtenay did not care to visit his wife's room, albeit he was perfectly sober. It was not, therefore, until next noon, when Marie failed to make her appearance at the breakfast table, that he thought to go to her. When he discovered her actual condition he grew just a shade paler, and a special call was sent for Kent.

"Good afternoon, Miss Felton—Miss Howard," smiled Edith, as she and her mother entered Miss Felton's little drawing-room.

"Thank you, yes. Tea, if you please. No sugar."

Mrs. Kent seated herself ceremoniously. "We have just come," she said, "from Mrs. Courtenay's. Edith left flowers, but we were not permitted to see her. James does not mention the case to us; it is his rule, you know; but I believe that he considers it serious."

"Pleuro-pneumonia, is it not?" inquired Eleanor, gravely, and seeing that neither of the ladies spoke, Joan replied, quietly:

"Yes; she is exceedingly ill. I was there this morning. Mrs. Van Alyn was just leaving. She had been there all night, and looked nearly as badly as Mrs. Courtenay, I thought."

"Have you seen Mrs. Courtenay?" asked Edith, in some surprise.

"For only a moment," answered Joan in an embarrassed manner.

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It was an awkward position, and Edith promptly made it worse. "Oh, yes, of course," she said. "I did not—" Then she stopped, biting her lip. Joan flushed, Mrs. Kent bridled haughtily, and Eleanor, who rather maliciously enjoyed the position, adroitly turned the conversation.

It was nearly a week since the little theater party just recounted. During that time Mrs. Courtenay had not risen from her bed, and her condition grew steadily worse. After that one neglected night, which had caused more than half of the mischief it had become so difficult to remedy, Marie had been surfeited with attentions, to which she now paid no attention whatsoever. When her husband entered the room she would brighten a little. At other times she lay perfectly inert, watching, her eyes dull with fever, as the doctor shook his head over her pulse, or dropped tasteless liquids from tiny white phials into crystalline water. Like all women, Mrs. Courtenay clung to her doctor as to some sympathetic angel, who possessed life-gifts always ready to be thrown to him whose need was sore. Marie had no actual fears as to her life. She never once thought of it so seriously as that. But this was not as pleasant an illness as some she had passed through. The pain in her chest was too severe for an effective languor, and she was not permitted to have her hair becomingly done for fear of catching cold. This made her actually unhappy. She began to long to be up again and fulfilling her engagements. Every one was very kind, and sent flowers innumerable, but the odor of flowers had become disagreeable to her. She worried also about

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the constant attention of her mother, who was growing worn and thin with anxiety. At length, however, she even ceased to notice this presence, and confounded Mrs. Van Alyn constantly with her trained nurse.

Courtenay was very good. He set his wife's mind at rest by fulfilling many of their evening engagements, answering her invitations, and sending cards to her teas. He also spent a good deal of time in her room, since she seemed to like having him near, and to his credit be it said that he always took pains to conceal how the time palled upon him. But with all this, there were still a good many hours of his own left, and even if he was expected to do so, he found it impossible to worry continually over his wife, who had never before been seriously ill, and probably would never be seriously ill again. At his wife's own request he went at this time to more dinners, receptions, dances, theaters, and balls than usual, and having nothing better to do at these functions, began to grow furiously jealous of Malcolm's proprietary devotion to Joan Howard, who had now almost ceased to notice him. He went home, however, more frequently than to the club these nights, always finding his wife patiently, painfully, sleeplessly awaiting his good night to her, and eager usually for an added word concerning the smartest costumes he had seen—for Courtenay had a good eye for a woman's dress. The nurse who now held sway over Mrs. Courtenay's hours was surprised and a little put out at that lady's periods of sleeping and waking. Mrs. Courtenay found it impossible to settle herself for the night

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before her husband made his last visit at twelve or one, or to awake in the morning before eleven at the earliest. Miss Brannit had at one time thought seriously of stopping Robert's late calls, and making poor Marie retire at the impossible hour of eight. But Dr. Kent, to Miss Brannit's intense astonishment, bade her leave Mrs. Courtenay in peace on the score of rest, and Miss Brannit soon discovered that there was much in habit. Besides that she was feminine, and was, it must be confessed, always near enough the bed at night to hear such sentences as these:

"White chiffon, silver embroidery, and a bit of point de Venise—or possibly it was Brussels; I did not dance with her." Or, "Mauve and old rose, with violets, and rather a fine collection of emeralds."

"Yes," thought Miss Brannit, "Mr. Courtenay was a strange man, but he was entertaining."

Nevertheless, neither doctor nor nurse was, after a week or so, satisfied with the patient's progress. For the first few days the disease which held her in its clutches remained at a stand-still, checked perhaps by the remedies applied to the body. Then it gained strength to resist opposition, finally to rise triumphantly in increasing fever. The fits of coughing grew so long and fierce that frequently Marie fainted from exhaustion when they were over. The fever did not abate, and so, at length, at one of his afternoon visits Kent decreed that Marie was to be strictly secluded from the world, and not permitted to see a single soul, save, if she were perfectly quiet and obedient, her husband, once every evening at seven

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o'clock. At this fiat Marie rebelled with feeble strength. She declared that the world would forget her, and was pitifully angry when Doctor Jim calmly remarked that this was precisely what he wanted. Marie had opened her lips to reply, when the nurse entered, whispering that Malcolm Van Alyn was below, wishing to see his sister. Marie merely looked up at the old medico, but Marie knew how to use her eyes.

"Just for the last time, doctor. You know that I haven't seen him since he—since I have been ill."

The doctor looked her over piercingly. "Very well," he said at length, picking up his case. "Miss Brannit, he is to stay for fifteen minutes, and not an instant longer. Then I am to understand, Mrs. Courtenay, that you agree to the verdict, and will see no one henceforth?"

Marie looked up fretfully, but, as she saw his face, nodded, adding, "No one but Bob."

A moment later both doctor and nurse left the room, and when Malcolm entered he found his sister alone. Van Alyn sat down in a chair by the bed awkwardly. He wished that he knew just what he ought to say to her. Marie and he had always been so different. Now she was looking up into the strong young face and thinking how weak and helpless she herself was. She laid one of her hands hesitatingly on his. Malcolm looked down at it with a queer feeling at his heart.

"Gracious, Sis, you've grown thin, haven't you?"

"Ah! My poor hands! They are disgraceful, Mal, are they not? I shall lay in cocoa-cream by the wholesale when I am up again."

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This topic did not open great possibilities of conversation. Malcolm was not well informed upon the subject of cosmetics, save that some women colored their cheeks, and that he did not like it.

"And so, Mal, you are actually engaged to be married at last?"

Malcolm looked down at her suddenly, but his face did not perceptibly brighten. "Yes," he said.

Mrs. Courtenay looked at him in surprise. "Why, what's the matter? You looked quite gloomy. Have you quarreled?"

Malcolm did not answer immediately. It would hardly do to tell Mrs. Robert Courtenay the cause of the slight unpleasantness between himself and his fiancée. "Oh, no! We haven't quarreled. We never do," he answered, affecting a yawn.

"You are not very courteous to her, I'm afraid," said Mrs. Courtenay. "I think Miss Howard lovely, but she is extravagant. She was having four new gowns at Weeks' the last time I was there. Don't you care for her, Malcolm?"

"Yes, May. Of course, I care for her, awfully. She is only a little different from what I had thought her, that's all."

"I have always thought her very picturesque. I told her so when she came the other day. She brought some exquisite orchids, which the nurse insisted upon taking out of the room. But Bob doesn't like Joan. He says that he does not think her at all pretty."

"Did you tell her that, too?" asked Malcolm, with a bitter meaning as well as the irony in his tone, neither of which Marie felt.

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"Why, of course not, Malcolm. How can you imagine that I would be so rude?"

"Oh, I don't know. I only fancied that Miss Howard might perhaps have asked how Courtenay liked her."

"You are very cross, Mal. You know I hate that tone of yours. I think that you might be kinder with me when I am ill."

Malcolm's expression changed immediately. He looked down at her, and picked up one of her hands with awkward tenderness. "I am a beast, Sis. I know that. But I've been confoundedly upset lately, somehow. Don't mind it. I'm sorry."

Marie was easily pacified. She smiled kindly and patted his hand as she said: "Do you know, Mal, you surprised and almost disappointed all of us when we found that you would not marry Edith Kent after all?"

Malcolm's mouth hardened at the corners. "It might have saved you something in doctor's bills if I had," he said, using the disagreeable tone again.

"I was awfully fond of Edith, though I could never quite understand her. Why did you not keep your engagement with her? It was really just the same as an engagement, you know. We all thought that you considered yourself bound, Mal."

Van Alyn was white with wrath. "It was no engagement!" he cried, fiercely. "A lot of prigs and fools chose to take it into their confounded heads that I must marry Edith, whether or no. It was idiotic. Why should I marry any one simply because our names

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were coupled? We never spoke of it to each other, and we didn't wish it, she any more than I."

"Oh! I suppose she jilted you, then. I did not know how it was."

This was merely amusing. Malcolm could not be angry with her, but stood jingling his keys, while his sister lay back upon her pillow and closed her eyes.

"Mr. Van Alyn," the nurse entered, "the fifteen minutes are over, and Mrs. Courtenay seems tired, I think."

"Oh, very well. Good-by, Sis. They tell me that I shan't be able to see you again for some time. Hope it won't be so very long. Be as careful of yourself as you can. You'll be chirkier soon. Good-by." And with a light tap on her shoulder he was off, somewhat relieved that the ordeal was over.

Marie lay back, thinking idly. "When he was angry there he looked just like Mr. Stagmar when you are speaking to him about his books. Really they do look alike. How curious that I have just thought of it."

So Marie Courtenay entered into her seclusion with a very good grace, considering her tastes. And society promptly forgot her after the first day or two. Flowers arrived periodically from those friends who had been thoughtful enough to leave standing orders with their florists; her trim, well-groomed little person left an instinctive vacancy in certain ball and drawing-rooms, and that was about all. Her mother, forbidden to see her, felt the loss keenly, for what mother does not yearn after a child in sickness or misfortune? Courtenay placidly went his own way,

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more seriously than usual, kissing his wife once after dinner, and for the rest of the time feeling himself free to do what he pleased.

Three weeks passed. Christmas came and went again. Christmas in the best society is not a day of festivity. What pleasure is left these people to enjoy afresh? "I am really rather glad to be in bed to-day," Marie had said weakly to Miss Brannit. "It is such a relief to feel that one need not be doing something very holy and enjoying one's self immensely at the same time—an impossibility, of course, but irritating to attempt."

For a moment the nurse did not reply; then she said thoughtfully: "You see, you have no children, Mrs. Courtenay. It would be different if you had."

"No," said Marie, wearily, and shut her eyes. Miss Brannit thus did not see the hot, shining tears beneath the white lids. Poor, tired, faithful, silly Mrs. Courtenay!

Three weeks passed, and in the second week of the New Year Marie's immediate circle of intimates were startled from their ordinary boredom. The only daughter of the Van Alyns had fallen into a state of coma from which it was impossible to rouse her. Doctor Kent ordered a consultation. The consulting doctors (one from New York) looked wise, examined the patient's lungs, looked wiser still, shook their heads and Kent's hand, and departed with their fees. Mrs. Courtenay's family, as well as her husband, came often now and stayed long beside her. They were very devoted and anxious, but Marie did not know them. For two days she did not speak, nor would

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she take food between her lips. Then Mr. and Mrs. Van Alyn went home again, for Madame was exhausted with watching, and Courtenay promised to let them know hourly by telephone the progress of the disease. If anything happened, Bromler assured his son-in-law that they could be there in ten minutes. "Anything" was said hastily, at a moment when Mrs. Van Alyn was not listening.

On the third night Courtenay was to watch in the sick-room, that the nurse might get some sleep. The man sat alone in the dim light, Miss Brannit dead with slumber in the room beyond, his wife motionless upon the bed. Courtenay found it impossible to read, and at intervals he dozed in the chair. The medicines were administered only hourly, and he did not care to think much. He had not contracted the pernicious habit of worrying unduly over anything, and certainly his wife had never before caused him an instant's anxiety. Though he had not been much in love with her at the time, he had not since regretted marrying her. He had never ill-treated and had been but rarely angry with her, according to his lights. Moreover, and above all, he had permitted her always to love him as much as she pleased, greatly as her affection bored him. On the whole, Courtenay was not a bad husband. He felt this as he closed his eyes; and, we are told, the sleep of the righteous is sound.

The night was passing quietly. At half-past three Miss Brannit awoke and resumed her watch over the sick-room, while Courtenay went off to a merited leisure. He offered to remain on guard during the

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remainder of the night while the nurse finished her rest, but upon her quiet refusal he looked once at his passive wife and then went away. Five minutes later he lay upon a couch in his own room, wrapped in profound slumber.

The next half-hour dragged through slowly. Mrs. Courtenay's pulse was scarcely beating. At ten minutes after four Kent came for his last night visit. It was the time when vitality is lowest. The doctor listened to his patient's respiration, and then called in an unsteady voice for brandy. It was administered, but Marie did not swallow it. The nurse chafed her arms, hands, and breast lightly, and at twenty minutes after four Mrs. Courtenay opened her eyes and raised her head from the pillow.

"Where is Robert?" she asked, in a weak but perfectly natural voice.

"Call him at once Miss Brannit."

The nurse disappeared, and the doctor remained alone with Marie Van Alyn Courtenay.

"I wanted to see Bob again," she muttered more thickly. "Say good-by to him for me, doctor, my love, and remember me—to—Edith and—dear—M—r—s. K—e—n—" She had trailed off at the last into a curious society sentence. Custom had been too much for her. She had lapsed again into unconsciousness, and before the nurse had returned with Marie's well-beloved, it had become necessary to telephone to the Van Alyn. Something had happened. A soul stood shivering on "the other side," and Robert Courtenay was a widower.

CHAPTER XVII.

MRS. KENT AND OTHERS.

If the extreme ultras of society in the city had been asked what event among their number could have given them the greatest shock of astonishment, not one of them would ever have thought of replying, "The death of Mrs. Robert Courtenay," but certainly nothing devised by themselves could possibly have affected them to such a degree as did the decease of one of their most valuably dressed members. Of all the people in the world, Marie Courtenay was the one whom you would least have expected to die. Regarded scientifically, she had done precisely what the doctors had predicted. Regarded proverbially, she should have recovered speedily, to grow, by lapse of years, into a graceful, elderly society woman, most desirable as a chaperone, and an autocrat concerning dress and *débutantes*. Her world was shocked, regretful, and most polite and attentive to the bereaved family. Her immediate clique, figuratively speaking, went into half-mourning, and asked Courtenay to small Sunday suppers and select musicals. There was a beautiful, impressive, and exclusive funeral. Marie had liked to be thought especially high church; therefore the church was lighted only by great candles about the altar and around the

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violet-covered bier, over which stood fifteen or twenty of her greatest friends. Behind them all, on that dark, January afternoon, the long aisles of the church stretched dimly, and gave back low echoes to the funeral chant. Only her own family followed her to the granite vault in Oakwoods, which before her had held only one baby coffin. Robert Courtenay, white, silent, and grayer than he had ever seemed before, was the last to leave the chapel where she lay. Her mother had not been present at all. She seemed for the time utterly broken. Malcolm was astonished at her words to him when she told him that she could not go.

"I cannot be seen by those people, Malcolm. It would be more than I could bear. For many years now I have taken part in their exhibitions, but this time—no. I said good-by to my daughter when I left her this morning. Let me be alone now. If I went to the church I might—I should hear Mrs. Kent remarking upon my costume."

And when Malcolm joined Joan Howard in the church he regarded her with more than usual tenderness and satisfaction, for she was dressed soberly and a little badly in black cloth, the only color about her being the ruddy gleam of her hair from beneath the heavy veil. Joan herself was strangely downcast and silent to-day, for there was a feeling of awe and loneliness in her heart such as Marie Van Alyn herself could never have caused her. And this tall, downcast, bitter-lipped man, with the gray hair thick upon his temples, was this Robert Courtenay, wifeless, childless, bondless, now? But the man stand-

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ing close beside her, with his head turned slightly away, that was the man whom she, Joan Howard, was to marry. "Alas!" The word came as an inaudible whisper from her parted lips, and why she had said it she dared not know.

Both Mrs. Kent and Edith were present. Mrs. Kent had come, commanding her daughter to accompany her, and Edith had obeyed coldly. On certain points she was not in sympathy with her mother. Nothing since the very beginning of her social career—and that had begun on the day that her aristocratic family had taken her, a tiny, flabby thing into its aristocratic arms—had annoyed Mrs. James Bartwick Kent so exceedingly as the engagement of Joan Howard to Malcolm Van Alyn. For years Mrs. Kent had been slowly collecting the most exquisitely fine pieces of linen and lingerie that the Old and New Worlds together could offer, confident that in a few months more the papers would be filled with accounts of a wedding to come, that of her daughter, and with columns specially devoted to the wonderful trousseau of the bride. Even Edith herself had taken pleasure in looking over these delicate things, but now—now they were not to be mentioned in her presence. Mrs. Kent had made this among other remarks to her husband on that night when first she had heard of the engagement of Stagmar's niece. Poor little Doctor Jim!

"My dear Louise," he had said, in a flat, dry voice, possibly caused by the Fellowship's old Port, "I have never perceived that Edith was violently in love with Malcolm Van Alyn. He is a nice boy, and

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the 'best catch,' I suppose one would say, of any of the young men around town. Nevertheless, if Edith is not much in love with him, and since he has shown a decided preference for another girl, as he has a perfect right to do, I should counsel you not to give the matter another thought. Take Edith to London in the spring, and have her presented if you must, but for the Lord's sake don't cry because she can't have a man who doesn't want her!"

Now, Dr. Kent had certainly not been himself when he spoke of a possibility of Edith's being presented at London. In a moment of sanity he would never have made such a remark, knowing his wife, as he certainly did. Therefore he should not have been surprised at her reception of such an idea. Sitting back suddenly in her elaborate dressing-gown, with a new light in her eyes, she remarked with great satisfaction:

"Really, James, that idea of yours about London is not bad. I could easily have Edith presented by dear Lady Bell, whom my family know very well. And certainly during a London season many eligible matches might be met with. I had scarcely hoped that you—"

The idea was progressing so rapidly that the poor doctor felt it absolutely necessary to crush it forever to earth while he could still cope with it. "Look here, Louise, did you really have any idea that I was in earnest when I said that? Well, then, listen now, and please remember what I say. I am Edith Kent's father, as well as her guardian, and while I live I shall keep that idea before you. Edith may remain

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an old maid if she likes, and she shall always be provided for, but never, with my knowledge, shall she be put off upon one of those foreign titles, penniless or not, who are accustomed to treat their women as secondary to their horses. I have known foreigners in my day. Now you have heard, and that is all I have to say."

It was sufficient. Mrs. Kent understood, but she was not satisfied. She had a great deal more that she could have said, and which for once she kept to herself, in order that it might ferment for future use. She had not the patience to wait long with it, however, and most of it was poured forth next day to Edith, who received it unflinchingly upon a silence of marble. Most of it related somewhat vulgarly to the young lady's carelessness in letting Malcolm stray from her side for a moment. The only hope—and a slim one it was—left to Mrs. Kent since the doctor's anti-nobility argument, was the hope of getting Van Alyn back. She dilated to Edith upon the importance of the family, and finally in an evil moment appealed to her daughter's affection for the scion of that house. Here Mrs. Kent discovered too late her serious mistake. Edith rose from their *tete-a-tete* with quiet, angry dignity.

"You seem to take it for granted that I loved Malcolm Van Alyn. Rid yourself of that delusion. I never have loved Malcolm Van Alyn at all in the way I was expected to do, for the excellent reason that I do love some one else with all the soul that is within me." Then Edith fled away, with her face flushed, and at her heart a great sense of joyful free-

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dom at having made an assertion which to herself dared not even assume the form of a confession.

At her daughter's totally unsuspected admission Mrs. Kent had first risen nervously, then sunk back overpowered, her little match-house blazing up and smoldering in ashes before her eyes. And so absorbed was she in the ruin of her hopes that she forgot, for the moment, to be curious.

I have exposed for your benefit the somewhat ignominious plan of action employed in the sanctum sanctorum of one family, which was generally so carefully kept within bounds that that family's own servants were unaware of its organization. Therefore it will not be difficult to realize that in the outer world of punctilious courtesy, before her friends and enemies, Mrs. Kent was entirely different. To no one without the family triangle did she ever admit her chagrin over Malcolm Van Alyn's atrocious behavior, and although she could not help being rather pointedly polite at times to Joan Howard, only one or two sharp-eyed people ever pierced the shell which hid her silent mortification. The ordinary intercourse between the two families was hardly lessened, save by the cessation of Malcom's frequent and informal calls upon Edith. But after Marie's death there were of course the visits of condolence, and two very quiet "family dinners," at which the young people were not present; and very few people indeed would have perceived any difference in the long standing intercourse. In point of fact, as Bromler Van Alyn said somewhat hesitatingly to his wife, the very long standing and informality of the old engagement made it the easiest thing

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in the world to get out of. Edith's only ring had been a tiny little turquoise that Malcolm had given her on a birthday when they were children together. She had not sent it back, only removed it and laid it away in the drawer whence she had taken it five years before when Malcolm had gone away to college, and had made his farewell to her very tender.

"The turquoise signifies faith," she thought. "Ah, well, we have both grown old enough to lose our belief in the immortality of faith." And here Edith laid her head down upon her little antique desk and thought for a great while, seriously.

Mrs. Kent was not alone in her opinion that Malcolm had behaved in a manner anything but gentlemanly to his friendly fiancée. For more than three weeks after his engagement—indeed, until after his sister's death—he had scarcely seen her, though a word of explanation made in some way would have seemed an absolute necessity. And Malcolm himself was the one who felt his discourtesy most keenly. Ever since that five minutes with Joan Howard in the orchid house he had been seeking an opportunity to find Edith alone. Three or four times he had tried to get up his courage to enter their house, but always he had turned coward in the end, till now so much time had passed that he felt it infinitely harder than ever to do.

It was three days after Marie's funeral that he made peace with his conscience. The Van Alyns' was a desolate home during those days, and suddenly his life seemed very aimless. Upon this particular afternoon he found himself strolling idly down Prairie

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Avenue with no object whatever in view. As he approached the Kents' residence he found his eyes fixed intently upon it. Three minutes later, scarcely conscious of how he had come there, he was before the door and pressing the bell. A moment after, he was admitted, and heard, vaguely, that Miss Kent was at home; next, that she would be down immediately. He laid aside his hat, coat, and stick, and wondered nervously what he was going to say when she did come. It was a dream to him so far.

He was brought to himself when she entered the library, taking no notice of the hand which he had unwittingly held toward her. They sat down opposite one another, and Edith looked for him to begin, which he did not do.

The pause was becoming startling, and Malcolm's face was as red as possible, when the young lady, who found it difficult to speak to him, remarked with apparent ease: "It is really a very long time since I have seen you to speak with you, Malcolm. Although it is rather late, and I have already seen Miss Howard several times, will you allow me to congratulate you most heartily upon your approaching marriage?"

It had been naturally said, and Malcolm, without any conceit, wondered how she could seem so tranquil and smile so readily over a matter which had cost him so many sleepless nights. All at once he felt like a man who has wantonly committed some peculiarly despicable crime. He was not thinking of Joan just now. To tell the truth, when he was not in her presence Helen Howard's daughter was not the same to him. At critical moments he was quite likely to for-

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get her altogether. Just now the queenliness of Edith Kent's personality seemed to him rarer, more beautiful, and more perfect than he had ever known it. At her words he grew pale, but in his answer he did not hesitate.

"Thank you, Edith. What I came for to-day was to say something that I have been wanting to tell you, and ought to have spoken about long ago. I—I—well, of course, you know that up to a few weeks ago there was a sort of understanding between us. By most people we were considered engaged. When my engagement to Joan Howard was announced I hate to think what a cad you must have believed me. I know—why, of course, I know, Edith, that you had every right to expect me to hold to our engagement while time should last. And I swear to you that I meant to have done so. Then one night you probably read in the papers that I belonged to her. It was true, all true. And I never came to you with a single word of explanation! Oh, I know how it must have looked to you. Yet perhaps I had a little bit more excuse for it than you might have believed. You know the night that I—I—told her I cared for her. It was at the Brents' dance. Do you remember how I rushed up and dragged her away from Garth, when she was beside you?" Edith nodded "I think I was crazy, almost, then. Until I waltzed around the room with her I had no more idea of asking her to marry me than—than—you—have of marrying her uncle." Edith winced at the blunder. Malcolm had paused for a moment retrospectively; then went on again.

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"We were in the little conservatory. There was not much light there, and it was awfully hot. Somehow it seemed to set me all on fire. I saw Joan standing near me with her head half bent, looking as though she wanted to get away from me. Something came over me with that idea that drove me mad. What devil's fascination that girl holds for me I can't tell. I got down on my knees to her right there and tried—to tell her how I felt. There was only one way of expressing it. Oh! curse that hour!"

"Stop, Malcolm!" cried Edith, rising to her feet. "What are you saying? How dared you use such words to me about a woman who is to be your wife!"

Malcolm stared at her for a moment. It was true that he had lost every vestige of self-control as the remembrance of the scene came back to him in his changed mood. He had flung forth all the bitterness that he had hitherto held down within himself. At Edith's interruption he blushed scarlet.

"Oh, Edith!" he cried out. "I came here hoping to get back a little of your respect for me, and now more than ever I have forfeited all the claim I ever had to it. No. Don't say anything to me. I saw how you looked at me just now. I won't ask your pardon. It will only make things worse. Good-by. I—I wish you knew—"

Poor fellow! He turned slowly but resolutely away from her to leave the room. Edith stood motionless watching him till he had put on his coat and gloves and took up his hat. He went down the steps into the entry. His hand touched the handle of the door. Suddenly Edith sprang impulsively for-

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ward, and called with a shaky note in her voice, "Malcolm! Malcolm, you—will—still come, sometimes?"

Malcolm looked up at her face, scarcely believing her words till he saw it. Then he went back again, and took both her hands in his. "You mean that, Edith? You want me—sometimes?"

"Yes, Malcolm—I—am—sorry."

The last words were almost less than a murmur, but Malcolm with his head bent near her caught them, and for days afterward when he thought of them his breast thumped queerly. As he turned reluctantly to cross the threshold their meaning was not clear to him, yet when he looked up at her again, and found her eyes following him with a new light in them he tried not to think. She was too much at ease with him for—that. Was she only sorry for his confessed mistake? Bah! She need not be. He was indignant at the very thought now of not being happy with Joan. A moment later and he found himself regretting having gone at all to her. Heigho! Poor Malcolm was surrounded by a group of mocking and unreasonably lovely might-have-beens.

Our all-too-ardent devotee of Aphrodite proceeded down the avenue with no pleasant expression of countenance. Presently a black-gloved hand fell upon his shoulder, and he turned to encounter the smiling eyes of his brother-in-law. Now, during these first days of his mourning, Courtenay managed to keep his face in perfectly subdued order, but Courtenay's eyes were another thing. To tell the truth the rear view of Malcolm on an afternoon in winter

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was rather amusing. Of late months he had seriously assumed a chimney-pot hat, which was scarcely adapted to his somewhat short, square, muscular figure. Moreover, he was attached to that top-hat, and never wore it without an air unconsciously assumed for the occasion. For a couple of blocks Courtenay had been enjoying himself hugely at the boy's expense, and had approached him for the fell purpose of rallying him about it. But it happened that just now was an unlucky time to indulge in chaff at Malcolm's appearance, for, as Courtenay began drawlingly to speak, Malcolm shook off his hand, and with still darker face wheeled abruptly about, and disappeared down a side street. It was impolitic, particularly at this time, but at the moment it would have been difficult for young Van Alyn to endure company.

Courtenay went on, sobered and annoyed. He had sometimes wondered of late whether, since he had given up his residence and gone instead into rooms at the club, with only his valet to attend him, his wife's family would gradually drop him. It would scarcely better his somewhat precarious social position if they did so, and certainly this reception of young Van Alyn's had had that appearance. Nay, it was rather too pointed for anything of the sort. Courtenay shrugged his shoulders lightly and crossed into the avenue also. He was a long way down now, nearly opposite to Stagmar's house. He wondered if Malcolm had gone there, and felt half tempted to follow him. It was not necessary. Malcolm could not have entered, for there was Joan Howard's slender figure descending the steps, and turning off in the same

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direction in which Courtenay was walking. He gave a smile of satisfaction, and quickened his pace.

"Good afternoon, Miss Howard."

"What! Mr. Courtenay! Where did you spring from?"

"The club window possibly—to tell the truth I was so astonished to see you on foot that I hastened to come up with you in order to find how it happens."

She laughed. "You think that I do not exercise? That proves conclusively, Mr. Courtenay, that you rise very late in the morning."

"Why?" He was not heeding her words, but watching the delicate shades of expression that crossed her face as she spoke.

"Because I take my constitutional regularly from nine to ten, and I nearly always pass the windows of the club. It is so forlorn at that hour that I like to contrast it with what it becomes later. I suppose, though, that it is not so forlorn very, very early in the morning—is it?"

He laughed, looking down at her smiling face meaningly, but made no other reply to her question. "Let me walk with you now," he said, and he was pleased with her quick look toward him as she nodded with involuntary pleasure.

"And if we walk, why not go somewhere at least? It is such work—to walk without an object. Let me take you up to Chatsworth's. He has finished the new Magdalene, and you should most certainly see it."

"I have already seen two Magdalenes of his," she said, as they turned off into a new direction. "He

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seems to run to that sort of thing, does he not? Both of ours are hideous. Uncle keeps one of them in his study directly over his desk. She is so pallidly malignant that he likes to horrify himself with her, I think."

Courtenay laughed. "I've seen that one, too," he said. "But the one Horace has just done is not at all hideous. It is very beautiful and an ideal conception of the Magdalene. It has your face."

Joan flushed. She had that in her nature which made her like the tone of confidential familiarity which this man used toward her, but she found it hard to keep her presence of mind in his company. She was never so ill at ease and never so nervously happy as with him. One quick glance from his searching, changeable eyes, and everything else was forgotten save that she was where she most wished and most feared to be,—with him. It was not a short walk to the studio, but neither of them felt its length. Courtenay himself was peculiarly sensitive to the fascination of Joan Howard's manner, more so perhaps than most men, for his whole organization was netted with nerve-fibers which responded more easily to this species of emotion than any other. He was sensuous to a degree, and to-day more than ever the music of the beautiful girl's voice rang through his ears and heart with hauntingly keen delight.

There were but two more blocks to go, and in crossing a street the couple were obliged to wait for a coupé which was coming rapidly toward them.

"Eleanor Felton," said Courtenay in Joan's ear, and at the same moment through the window of the carriage came a nod and a curious smile from that

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eccentric personage, while upon the other side of her a bunch of plumes waved stiffly, and Miss Howard caught a frigidly courteous recognition from Mrs. Kent. Courtenay's lip curled amusedly as he raised his hat.

"Queer combination, those two," said he. "They've been growing very chummy lately. Have you noticed it?"

This was true, strange as it seemed for Mrs. Kent to be "chummy" with any one. Some weeks before Mrs. J. Bartwick had remarked composedly to the doctor that she intended to get up a new fad. What would he advise? She had thought of collections, pipes, or crystals, or perhaps heavy music, Brahms or Tchaikowsky—if one could keep awake; then there was also geniuses. Upon the whole, they were best, she thought. To get in with modified Bohemia—artists of good family, ditto literati, entertain visiting virtuosos—in short become a lion huntress? Eh? What did he think? She was charmed with the last idea, as she thought it over more thoroughly. Doctor Kent did not have much to say, as he was not particularly interested in lions, being rather exclusively devoted to bacteria at present. But his wife was wrapped in her plan, and as a preliminary, set out to court Eleanor, who knew everybody of that description. Eleanor was aware that she was being "taken up," but she merely laughed, and began studiously to affect Mrs. Kent. It was rather an amusing task after all. She had just shocked that classically moral lady immeasurably by taking her to see Mrs. Fiske as Tess of the d'Urbervilles, telling her that it

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was the marvel of the century in the way of acting. When Mrs. Kent had not been bored she had been astounded indeed. After Eleanor had informed her follower that she herself had seen it five times, and ranked it over any play that Bernhardt had done, poor Mrs. Kent sighed, and began to think that the road through Bohemia held more quirls and dark corners than she had ever imagined. Yet verily she stood only on the outer boundaries of the land as yet.

When, however, the metamorphosed society woman watched Joan Howard and Courtenay disappearing down the street, apparently entirely absorbed in each other, she felt that once again she was on ground she knew.

"I consider it excessively imprudent of Herbert Stagmar to let—" she began, as soon as they had passed the couple.

"So do I," broke in Eleanor rapidly, for she was not too fond of Mrs. Kent's endless dissertations, and one of the advantages of eccentricity is the being able to make whatever breach in the polite code of rules that you wish. "Silly of Herbert to get a girl like that on his hands and then not hurry and get her off. If I were her guardian I should marry her myself, I thing."

Mrs. Kent was shocked, but not alarmed. "My dear Miss Felton!" she expostulated.

"Well, then," pursued Eleanor, calmly, "since there is really no need of that, Joan being already engaged, I should hurry on her wedding as fast as possible. What she does afterward will not matter."

Mrs. Kent was perturbed now. Stagmar might

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entertain these views himself. "My dear Eleanor, recollect how serious marriage is, and how very young Miss Howard is—is supposed to be."

Eleanor did her best not to laugh. "For a girl of her temperament she's old enough, and Malcolm can certainly take care of himself."

Mrs. Kent winced, but still showed marvelous forbearance. "Really I cannot agree with you there. Twenty-six is not an advanced age for a young man."

"Perhaps. I was only putting forth my views as to her management. For myself, I sympathize with Joan. I consider Robert Courtenay infinitely more interesting than Malcolm Van Alyn."

Mrs. Kent merely raised a lorgnette. The act irritated Eleanor far more than anything the poor woman could have said. This time she determined to punish her affector effectually.

"Dear Mrs. Kent! I've an idea! It is nowhere near time to do anything for evening yet. You must come with me to Horace Chatsworth's rooms. His studio is not five minutes from here. He's sure to have a lot of people there to-day. Saturday afternoon, you know, and besides that, his new picture is finished. You must certainly see it." Without giving the other a chance to disclaim, Eleanor gave the order to the footman, and they turned up the avenue.

Mrs. Kent sighed heavily. Nobody knew how tired she was. She would go to see Horace's picture if necessary. She disliked pictures intensely. But she would not stay long in the studio. Upon that point her mind was firm.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE STUDIO.

Early on the Saturday afternoon, whose later hours were to bring him four such distinguished and un-hoped for guests, Chatsworth sat alone in his studio, meditating. For several days he had been unable to do a stroke of work worth leaving on the canvas, and his room looked it. Two covered pictures leaned up against the wall, and a third canvas stood crookedly upon an easel in the center of the room. On this scarcely begun picture the paint lay in thickly daubed patches, bearing no likeness whatsoever to any form, unless the shadowy gray outline in the center was some day to become a head and bring into subjection the blatant tints surrounding it, making something artistic out of the whole. Chatsworth made no pretense of working. He lounged in a chair near the window; a meerschaum, well-browned, between his teeth, a volume of Kant upon his knee, and one hardy hand pulling at his thick brown beard, a habit of his when he was trying to fix his mind on anything. He was not reading. His eyes were fastened upon the small canvas in the corner as though he could see through the cloth which bound it; and was contemplating the features of his third Magdalene. From the ragged condition

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of his dressing-gown and slippers it was plain that he looked for no visitors this afternoon.

At a few minutes past three came a vigorous ring of the bell from below. He went to the door, opened it, and peered down the narrow hall. Two men were clambering up the last flight, and having reached the top, came toward his rooms, still panting after the many stairs. Horace could not distinguish their features until they got into the light from his own rooms, then, however, he hurried forward and grasped their hands heartily.

"This is good—fine. Jove! It's a long time since you've been here, Mr. Stagmar. And, Kent, how are you? Come now, get your things off and your pipes lit. Mine's out. Take the couches there; they're better than the chairs. All right now?"

A grunt came from Kent when the young artist had finished pushing them into place, and Stagmar puffed contentedly for a moment before he drew his knees up and said, "You haven't forgotten the old ways at any rate, Horace."

"No, bless them! and I never will."

"That's right, boy," muttered Kent, roughly.

Silence for five minutes, then Stagmar lifted one limb and tilted it comfortably over the other, remarking: "Queer thing you've got there, Horace. What is it? Study of a crazy-quilt, or one of harmonization of unharmonious color?" He pointed as he spoke to the half-begun picture.

"Neither," replied the artist, pleasantly. "It will be great when it—comes out."

"When's it coming?" queried the doctor, lazily.

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"That's more than I can say," responded Chatsworth, lapsing into apathy. "I don't know whether I shall ever paint again."

"What's the matter? Somebody jilted you?"

Stagmar smiled at the quick look of disgust that came into the artist's face at the words. "No; hardly, thank the Lord! The fact is I only wish that I could jilt something myself."

"Widow?" asked the doctor with interest.

Chatsworth burst into a great guffaw. "It's not a woman," he answered. "It's this beastly city."

"The city," asked Kent, quickly. "What is the matter with the city? I have never found fault with it?"

"It's first-rate for doctors."

"*Mais—le quartier Latin pour les artistes,*" put in Stagmar, enjoying the doctor's expression as he peered over the back of his divan to examine the writer's face. Kent had few yearnings toward the acquirement of modern languages. The artist, however, was not worried over words.

"That's it, damn it!" he remarked, without violence. "It's getting next to impossible for me to do anything here. There's no more conception of art in this place than there would be in Tartarus."

"Less, I should say," put in Stagmar. "Some very distinguished artists doubtless repose in Tartarus."

"To wit?" queried their disciple.

"To wit, Michael Angelo!" shouted Kent, joyous at finding himself once more on ground of his own. "If they didn't stuff him down into a heated temper-

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ature after that 'Last Judgment' of his in the confounded Sistine Chapel, why, Peter is getting too infirm for his position, that's all."

"Lucky for you if he is," grunted Chatsworth, who had never seen the Sistine Chapel, but objected to having the traditions of his craft put so outrageously at naught. Stagmar, however, applauded, and smiled comfortably.

"Good boy, Kent. Stick to your own ideas about things you don't understand. It is always rejuvenating. Fancy the husband of Mrs. J. Bartwick daring to disapprove of the divine Buonarrotti!" the last sentence was muttered under his breath, for his own benefit; but his little humor was broken off by the meditative tones of the doctor, whose ideas had taken another turn.

"These little arguments are like old times, too. You can remember Herbert and me in the old days, can't you, Horace?"

"Remember you! As well as I do my father!"

And from here the conversation trailed off into reminiscences of other days which lie long before our story. One sentence only—that which closed a long talk—may be worth inserting here. Horace was speaking.

"Kent has grown older in figure; not so very much in face, it seems to me. You've changed more, Stagmar. Your face used to be quite open and cheerful. I can remember your desperation the winter you failed with your moustache, you know. But you aren't the same now. The lines are heavy around your mouth and eyes, and you look careworn, as you never used

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to do. Somehow you are more severe, more unapproachable. Oh, I beg pardon; I didn't mean to be personal. I didn't think of that, you know."

When Horace finished Kent was studying the writer seriously. He did not speak, but nodded to himself once or twice, contemplatively, as Stagmar smiled rather soberly, and answered: "Don't apologize, Horace. Your father wouldn't have done so. It's true, what you said."

The afternoon was far gone now, and the older men shook out their pipes, rose reluctantly, and put on their ties. Horace dived into a little corner closet, from which he extracted a somewhat battered samovar, tea, lemons, a box of biscuits, and something brown in a large flask. Jim Kent, who had been lighting lamps, immediately seized upon this latter article, and, being in a light-hearted mood, held it aloft, and began to execute a certain Indian dance for which he had once been celebrated. His short legs fairly flew through the air, and from his ample mouth issued a succession of astounding grunts and shrieks. Stagmar, catching the spirit of the moment, grasped a palette-knife, and followed his leader, round and round the table, with a series of crouching steps and leaps, his hair over his forehead, his lungs inflated vigorously with air, which he emitted in spasms of magnificent yells. All the abandon of Bohemian days was upon them again.

In the midst of this tumult Horace glided unnoticed to answer the bell. Without the door stood Courtenay and Joan. The former was highly amused at Miss Howard's wide-eyed astonishment over the noise

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from within, and her wonder certainly did not lessen when she recognized, through the frame of the ante-room portière, the two leaping figures in the room beyond, as her father and pompous little Doctor Jim. She was about to speak to Chatsworth, who was bowing over her hand, when Robert, who had been peering down the stairway, turned to them with his eyes gleaming.

"Oh, Miss Howard!" he whispered, "here come Mrs. Kent and Miss Felton. For heaven's sake don't stop the fun! I want to study Mrs. Kent's expression when she sees J. Bartwick."

A ring from below confirmed his words, and the three at the door shook with laughter. Joan, entering into the spirit of the moment, murmured a word to the two men, who forthwith rushed in together to join the dance, which was steadily increasing in noise and jollity. The contretemps in the ante-room had scarcely lasted two minutes. Joan remained in the doorway to receive the two ladies, whose rustling skirts could even now be heard on the steep little stairs. Mrs. Kent was astounded, curious, and, withal, rather nervous at breaking into the tremendous crescendo of wild sounds coming from above; and to tell the truth, Eleanor herself was a little astonished at the noise. But she had rashly determined to drag her silken-shod explorer through to the end of the strange country she had wished to see, and this resolve Eleanor was going to keep.

"My dear Eleanor, what do you imagine is happening?" murmured Mrs. Kent for the fourth time, at least, on the stairs.

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"This? Oh, this is the most common thing in the world; you would not think much of it had you known studio life as I have," responded Eleanor at last, in her most matter-of-fact manner.

"Dear, dear! How curious it must all be!" said the poor lady.

They reached the ante-room, the door of which stood widely open. The little place was dark, and Joan, who could not trust herself to speak, did not at once come forward. It was indeed a strange sight. The light from three lamps in the studio brilliantly illumined that room, but it was the flickering flame of the samovar that shone on the faces of the four men, who now stood around the table, their hands clasped high, indulging in the swinging, swaying steps which actually mark part of an Indian festival dance. Hoots, shouts, and hoarse yells issued from four stout throats. Mrs. Kent gasped as she recognized Robert Courtenay opposite her. But when presently the circle moved on again, Kent and Stagmar, entirely unconscious of onlookers, Courtenay and Chatsworth aching with suppressed laughter, the conspirators took care to stop again at half round, and Kent faced the ante-room. Jim was in all the satisfaction of a gurgling howl, when suddenly Stagmar, with an exclamation, dropped his hand.

"James!" came a tremulous but imperative voice.

The doctor gave a quick jerk, and stopped still, his flushed cheeks growing white. Stagmar's face was tinged with color. Robert and Horace dropped helplessly into chairs, and three ladies entered.

Matters were explained gracefully and without

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delay. Mrs. Kent had been too utterly stunned to be difficult of approach, and besides that the doctor's company had certainly been excellent. Nevertheless, Kent continued to look a trifle dubious, and Stagmar, as he quizzically examined his daughter's expression, declared that never before in his life had he felt so extremely young.

The disordered room was quickly set to rights. Miss Felton was seated before the tea arrangement—from which the brown flask had opportunely disappeared—and Mrs. Kent was at liberty to use her lorgnette, while Chatsworth passed cups and made himself generally useful and agreeable. Many apologies were made by him for the state of his apartment, but as the ladies seemed to be a trifle astonished at this and to imagine that such was the ordinary condition of art, he finally ceased from disclaimers.

Joan was anxious to see the covered pictures in the corner, and as Chatsworth was earnestly endeavoring to explain the "color study" to Mrs. Kent, Courtenay followed the girl to the others. Stagmar and the doctor were devoting themselves to portfolios, tea, and Miss Felton. Courtenay knelt beside the smaller canvas, and Joan, sending one quivering glance into his responsive eyes, sank into a chair beside him, her elbow on an arm of the chair, her head on her hand.

"This is the Magdalene," said Courtenay in a low tone, throwing the cotton cloth back from the finished head. Joan did not speak. She was looking not at the Magdalene, but at the strong profile of the man beside her. Slowly his gray-green eyes were raised to hers. There was a deep laugh of triumph in

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them, but the girl shivered. "Joan!" he muttered, half to himself, with his lips dry. The name struck her ears, and made her heart throb once. She almost smiled, leaned forward, and her hand fell into his, which was very cold.

"Oh, I see, dear Mr. Chatsworth! How delightful it will be when it is finished. Ah! Art is the only thing, after all! How often I have said to James that I could live for that alone!"

Kent grinned unpardonably at Horace, who turned hastily away from him, but had control enough not to betray himself.

"Horace, show them the large picture you were at work upon when I was here last. The Phryne, don't you know? Miss Howard is already seizing upon the other." This in Eleanor's well-modulated tones, with, however, rather more meaning in the last phrase than was politic. Stagmar glanced quickly at her, then at his niece, who, standing by Courtenay, was directing his placing of the little picture on an easel. The great picture was before them, covered.

Chatsworth came and stood close by Miss Felton, undecidedly for a moment; then he whispered anxiously to her: "Would it be wise to show the Phryne, do you think? These hardly seem to me the people to appreciate it, and accept it for what it is meant to be."

Eleanor laughed. "Oh, I am initiating Mrs. Kent in the methods of art. She will not dare say anything critical of it."

"Yes, but—but—" A glance finished his sentence.

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Miss Felton's face grew serious. She glanced from Stagmar to Courtenay. "True," she murmured. Then aloud, "No, Horace, I fancy you had better not."

Chatsworth nodded and turned away. But it was not so easy now to escape showing the picture. They were all around him, demanding, with something more than mere politeness, to see his painting; all, that is, save Stagmar, whose fingers drummed impatiently on the table as he watched Joan's face.

"My dear Chatsworth," he now broke in suavely, "it is really time for my *au revoir*. Joan and I will walk home together. I have not ordered the carriage since I did not expect her. We dine a trifle earlier than the rest of you, I fancy."

The others would have urged his staying, but Eleanor said immediately; "Take my coupé, Herbert. It is too long a walk for Miss Howard. Send it back for us when you reach home; we shall be ready to go also by then."

Joan was willing to leave. Enough had happened for one evening. Courtenay put her heavy cloak about her. "You will let me see you soon?" he asked her, without much reason for the remark. For the moment her fascination was lost over him. Therefore he was uncomfortably startled by her significant reply.

"In a week. Only give me a little time."

She did not look at him, fearing to trust herself; therefore she did not see his shoulders go up, nor read the scorn of her in his eyes. Had she done this—

When they were gone Mrs. Kent once more renewed

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the plea for a view of the picture, and it is to be feared that even in that model of decorum there was just an atom of reprehensible curiosity about certain things. At any rate, this time Horace merely smiled somewhat mischievously, and before he exhibited the portrait he put in a word of explanation.

"You see, Mrs. Kent, every artist has dreams of Paris and the salon. This picture was painted more with an ambition of the *chambre d'honneur*, the line, and the *prix de Rome*, than with the idea of selling it in the practical West. I have always said that when the last shadow was in, to Paris it should go, to be sold there. It is not more than three-fourths finished now. There it is—an ideal portrait of Phryne."

As he spoke he threw back the cover from his work and stood in the shadow of it scanning the expressions of his guests. Eleanor Felton was frankly admiring, Mrs. Kent struggled not to be shocked, the doctor tried as hard to be severe, and Courtenay was critically contemplative. They gazed at it in silence for a moment, then Courtenay, the irrepressible, said for the benefit of Mrs. J. Bartwick:

"The flesh wants more green shadow straight through. It's frightfully healthy and rose-maddery now. Then drop the cloth a little more over the left shoulder so as to bring out the dark line between the arm and the body. That'll do it all, I should say."

Chatsworth nodded appreciatively, for the criticism was not unreasonable. But Mrs. Kent, feeling it her duty, broke in quite impetuously:

"Oh, really, Mr. Courtenay, it would quite ruin

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the painting to darken the lines a bit more. Such an exquisite picture! But the face is extremely pale—do not you think so? Why not add rouge? It would be so harmonious with her character!"

Jim paid no attention to her. "The skin is too dark," he was muttering absent-mindedly, but was roused and startled a little by an indignant look from his lady and her satisfied question, "Is it oil or water-color, Mr. Chatsworth?"

Horace actually blushed. Eleanor bit her lips hard, but had to turn away in the end. Jim's disgust knew no bounds, but Courtenay maintained his reputation and saved the day at the same time.

"Water-color, dear Mrs. Kent," he said, soothingly. "Anything as large as that is very rarely trusted to oils."

Eleanor came back then, and led a sensible conversation herself until Chatsworth, who was woe-fully chagrined at their reception of his masterpiece, covered it over again. "Oh, if Herbert could only have been here!" he muttered rather bitterly. But there was a pleasant smile in the midst of his shaggy beard for his last guests as they now turned to go. The coupé had returned. The ladies departed together, leaving Jim and Courtenay to walk at their leisure. When they had all gone the artist flung himself violently upon a chair, an empty briar-wood in his mouth, a heavy scowl on his face.

"I'll begin the finish of that wretched thing to-morrow," he cried, stamping on the floor. "I loathe it. When it's done I'll present it to a half-orphan asylum, or some such abode, as a chromo. Then I will go to

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designing posters for a living. Art! Good Lord! These people don't know what the word means!"

"Eleanor," Mrs. Kent was saying at the same time, "do you know, I think that I shall persuade James to get the large picture when it is finished? It will help me to appreciate the beauties of realism, which I fear I cannot comprehend just yet. Do you think that we could obtain it?"

And Eleanor, rejoicing over an opportunity for Chatsworth, answered with some dubiousness: "I can hardly say, Mrs. Kent, whether he would be willing to sell it here, where the value of such work is so little appreciated. I should advise your offering rather a high price for it."

"Dear, dear! I trust that we shall be able to obtain it!" cried the other. "I shall request James to speak for it to-morrow. Horace is such a talented fellow—and—and so remarkably eccentric!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE REMOVING OF AN OBSTACLE.

One afternoon, eight days after the affair at the studio, Miss Howard sat idly before her dressing-table, toying with some of those delicate little instruments indispensable to the happiness and welfare of any society woman or girl. She had arrayed herself to her entire satisfaction in a negligé of heavy white corded silk, which swept in classic lines down her figure and about her feet on the floor. The long locks of her bright red hair fell loosely about her cheeks and over her shoulders far below her waist. During the months of her society life her face had lost the little color it had once possessed, and now gleamed ivory white and clear as a pearl from its ruddy frame. Her white feet had half thrust aside their swansdown slippers and rested in delicate indolence upon the little fox-fur rug before her chair. Joan leaned back, critically contemplating her reflection in the mirror. She was too vain to appear in the least conscious of herself, for in her own eyes, and in the eyes of some others also, no woman she had ever seen was comparable to her. One there was, perhaps, whom years had made more superb; but only one, and that her mother.

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In the midst of this contented soliloquy Miss Howard's maid came to the door bearing a card. The girl glanced at it, smiled faintly, and said that she would be down immediately. "Here, Annette, hurry with my hair, please. He is early," she thought to herself as she threw off the dressing-gown.

Robert Courtenay lolled comfortably back in one of the drawing-room chairs, lazily partaking of chocolates from a bonbonnière on a small stand beside him. Stagmar was not at home. Courtenay knew that. He knew also that the writer was gone to a special meeting of some members of the Board of Trade, to which he, Courtenay, had not been asked. The cut, however, did not annoy him, since it presented him with an excellent opportunity of spending an hour or two with Miss Howard alone. To tell the truth, Courtenay was beginning to feel a certain amount of intercourse with Joan Howard to be indispensable to his personal happiness. The girl roused many forces usually dormant in his nature, and she could also completely fascinate him when she did not try. Courtenay had in him too much of the dare-devil not to enjoy fingering fire occasionally. Just how it would all end he did not know, and he did not care to know. He preferred living in the present; and the chocolate creams were satisfactory, until, at the end of fifteen minutes, he rose expectantly, hearing the sound of skirts on the staircase.

His eyes were full upon her as she entered, and noted every detail of the carefully careless toilet. As she sank into the chair from which he had risen, he drew a low, cushioned, backless seat toward her and

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sat down in such a position that no expression of her face would be lost to him.

"I have given you a week," he began, lightly. "I could not deny myself longer. Are you satisfied?"

Joan smiled slowly. "I wonder why I told you not to come for a week?" she said, demurely, glancing at him from under the white lids.

"You wanted me—to give you time."

"Really! Do you always remember people's exact words?"

"I remember your words. But I should like better to know what you meant," he hazarded.

"And do you fancy that I can remember for eight whole days what I meant by one ridiculous speech on that tumultuous occasion?"

"Then you didn't do it?" he asked, rapidly.

Joan looked both startled and confused. She said nothing in words, but she knew that Courtenay read her reply.

"Poor Mal!" he laughed.

The girl had not the courage to treat this unbounded impudence as it deserved. She scarcely knew what to do. "Do you really know what I meant by that, Mr. Courtenay?"

"Not unless you want me to."

"You speak as though you despised me immeasurably."

"I don't despise you, Joan. Worse than that—you—you—" He stopped, looking at her apprehensively. She had twisted into the attitude of a cat crouching for its prey. Her face was thrown up, her ears, as Æneas' were, pricked up to hear. Only she

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listened not for the clash of arms and clang of trumpets. Her spell was heavy over the man beside her. Courtenay's eyes could not leave her face. In the moment when she smiled she was fearful. For the first time in his life Courtenay began to feel that he had met his conqueror.

"Great God!" he muttered, hoarsely, "I love you!"

She held out to him one white, steely hand. Grasping it, he sank to his knees beside her on the floor. The sweat broke out upon his forehead. The woman scarcely lived; she was watching her prey.

The handle of the door turned. Courtenay leaped up instantly.

"Mr. Van Alyn," announced the butler, and Malcolm, bright, boyish, in the best of spirits, and tingling with cold from the February afternoon, came vigorously in. Perhaps his face clouded the barest trifle when he saw his fiancée's companion; but Malcolm was not of a jealous nature, and, if the truth must be told, he had become a shade careless of Joan Howard's relations with others. He would not for a moment have acknowledged that this was because he did not care for her any longer. It was only because—well, because she seemed to enjoy varied society so thoroughly. If Malcolm turned a bit hypocritical here who will blame him? Not I. He was a long-suffering, charitable, and patient lover at best, and if now he was not so madly in love as he had been during the first mad days, why it was infinitely better for his peace of mind.

As he entered Joan rose. She wished, figuratively

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speaking, to shake herself out. Going forward with a bright smile, she occupied the young fellow long enough to enable Courtenay to recover himself. Robert was grateful for this foresight, but even when Malcolm, with a careless "How are you, Court?" passed him, and sat down beyond the table, Courtenay was hardly able to return a coherent greeting; and it required an enormous amount of self-control to enable him to stay in the room at all. Joan was somewhat surprised to find that he did not go at once, but for fifteen minutes he forced himself to sit there, and even, after a moment or two, joined in the conversation with a semblance of ease.

"Do you know, I am quite excited over the thought of Monday night?" said Joan, smilingly.

"What is Monday night?" inquired Courtenay.

"That's very kind of you, Court. You see on Monday night we are going merely as a family for the music. Mother, Father, Court, and I are to be along. However, our box is next to yours, so we shall still be able to speak occasionally."

"Mr. and Mrs. Kent and Edith are to be with us," responded Joan. "Families seem to cling to one another on opening nights. Melba in 'Traviata,' you know, Mr. Courtenay."

"Yes; I believe I remember now."

"I am so glad that both of you are going."

"My mother was—" Malcolm hesitated, "not quite sure how it would look. On account of—of May, you know. But she likes the music."

"And the people in the West do not mind crape, but cannot bear losing their amusements." Strangely

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enough, from Courtenay's lips this did not sound brutal. Nevertheless, the silence was awkward till Joan spoke again:

"It will be the first opera that I have seen."

"Is that possible!" cried Malcolm.

"You forget my convent education. Hitherto my music has been confined to masses, hymns, and aves."

"All vastly preferable to 'Traviata,'" replied Courtenay. "I cannot think of a more dismal opera for a first night. However, Miss Howard, there is one grace about it for you. Melba's costumes are extremely costly and rather beautiful—that is, if she is still wearing those of last year."

"Trust Court for knowing about the clothes," said Malcolm, laughing. "Most women don't know half so much about their own things as he."

Courtenay laughed also, but looked pleased. It was his weakest point to be thought an authority on dress, and in very truth his taste in that direction was excellent. Yet a more uneffeminate man never lived. Joan looked at him curiously when Malcolm had spoken, but for her own dress she had not much to fear.

A moment or two more, and Courtenay at last had risen. "I must be going, Miss Howard. I have stayed an unpardonable while. *Au revoir* until Monday."

The heavy portière of the drawing-room dropped behind him; the great outside door had shut. Courtenay was gone, and Joan was left with Malcolm and that resolve of hers which had grown suddenly to gigantic strength. She rose rather nervously and

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rang for Carson. Malcolm, quite at home with her, stood in front of a table examining a procession of Japanese ivory animals of minute proportion.

"Tea, Carson," said the girl, and, in spite of her, her voice was strange. Carson disappeared.

"Going to Bournique's this evening?" inquired the young fellow, looking up.

She started out of her plans. "Bournique's? Yes—no—I can't tell. Why do you ask? Surely you are not going?"

"Why not?" he inquired, with a little irritation. "They are exclusive things. One can't mope at home forever."

Joan wished to quarrel with him. It was the easiest thing that could happen for her. "It seems to me that it shows wonderfully little respect for your sister's memory."

"Nonsense, Joan. Would Marie have acted differently had it been I? A thousand people die every day in the world. It is not an unusual thing."

"Unusual? Oh, no. Perhaps it is only because I have no sister that I labor under the delusion that the thought of the loss of one would be too painful for me to care to dance through every night for at least six weeks after her death. I perceive that here it is not the custom to remember those that have gone before."

"Really, as that—" began Malcolm, angrily, when Carson came in with the tea.

"Will you have cream or lemon?" inquired the girl, coldly.

"Lemon and cognac."

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"Carson! you have forgotten the cognac. You will pardon his stupidity. He doubtless thought, as I did, that it was possible for boys of your age to take one beverage at least without the aid of an intoxicant."

"Joan, Joan! Come! Don't be angry with me. I fancied the cognac was there. My mother usually serves it so. It doesn't make any difference to me. Rather, I should prefer tea clear, since you do not approve of the other."

Joan shrugged her shoulders. "We will wait for the cognac," she answered, icily.

Malcolm's face darkened, but he restrained himself from saying anything more as he turned abruptly and walked to the other end of the room. Joan, thoroughly unhappy, sat stiffly at the tea-table. She could not argue herself into anger at Malcolm.

Carson entered with the decanter. Miss Howard received it and dismissed him. Staring painfully at the back of Malcolm's coat, she poured out half a cupful of the biting liquor, adding just enough tea to warm it nauseously, then dropping sugar and two slices of lemon into the mixture. Again she looked up at the man. He did not turn.

"Your tea is ready. Will you come and take it, please?"

Courtesy forbade his refusing the invitation. He came forward and accepted the cup. Before he raised it to his lips the fumes of the heated brandy reached him. Bracing himself invisibly, he took the whole of the concoction in three swallows without any

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apparent effort. Then he laid the cup upon the table. "Thank you," he said, pleasantly.

Joan looked at the empty Sévres in astonishment and anger. She herself was trying to appear as though she enjoyed the tea-flavored, tepid lemonade which it is nowadays considered proper to regard as preferable to the hot, cream-whitened, and comfortable drink of our forefathers. And since a smile and an expression of unobtrusive delight is necessary to the bibatory process, Joan at the present moment found it nearly an impossibility to maintain her equilibrium of manner at all. Besides this, she knew that now she must nerve herself to a difficult and disagreeable task.

Van Alyn was passing an unusually unhappy hour. Rarely had he known Miss Howard so consistently disagreeable. He did not feel called upon to prolong his visit. Before she had finished her tea, he rose, yawning perceptibly.

"Well, Joan, I fancy that my presence here is rather a bore to both of us. I evidently did not arrive at a propitious moment. No doubt Courtenay was more entertaining. My things are outside—good—"

"No, no, Malcolm. Sit down, please. I—I want to say something to you at once. It will not be very long. Then—you may go."

Malcolm looked resigned and sat down again. Joan made a last effort with her tea, but had to put the cup back before it reached her lips, for she would not let him see her hand tremble. Young Van Alyn waited till Joan could take breath to begin. He had

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not a suspicion of what she was about to say. Finally, with her head bent over the table, she began to speak, slowly. She could not lift her eyes, but kept them so fixed that to the day of her death she could remember the exact pattern of the arabesques that ran over the cups.

"I've been thinking a lot lately, Malcolm, on one subject, and I have come to a conclusion concerning it. It is—oh, this is awfully hard for me to say, Malcolm—it's about our engagement." The young fellow leaned forward in his chair with a changed expression. "I have been watching both you and myself for a week now. I have doubted my ability to love you as I should, and certainly your feeling for me is different from what it was. I honestly do not think that we can either of us realize just what marriage would mean. I know that my uncle wishes our marriage, that your family expect it, and still I believe, from the bottom of my heart, Malcolm, that we had better break it off before it is too late, than for both of us to be unhappy forever after." She rose very quietly and drew the solitaire from her finger. "Here is the ring, and with it your freedom, Mal. I only hope that this may make us firmer friends, instead of our being lax lovers. I am very fond of you in that way—I only don't love you as a wife. Will you understand—and—try—to forgive—me?"

It took Malcolm two or three minutes to find himself after she stopped speaking. He had been absolutely astonished—more, stunned. Yet now he took the ring from her, and kept her hand in his own for a minute.

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"Have I treated you unkindly, Joan?" he asked.

"Never! Oh, no, Malcolm! Please do not think that. You have always been very, very kind; much more forbearing than I have deserved. But isn't there some truth in what I have said, Malcolm? Isn't it true that you feel as I have suggested?"

"N—no, Joan. Indeed no. I—there is nothing more to be said, however. I could not hold to a bond that you wish broken. I am sorry. I had never for a moment expected it. Must we—explain, to every body?"

"Oh, no. Only to a few. The rest will find out, gradually enough."

"Good-by, then. Good-by. Believe me, Joan, I'm sorry."

He was gone, and Joan was left alone now with her new freedom, and a sudden new anxiety greater than anything she had known before. Malcolm's day was over with her, and a pleasant day it had been—innocently frank, and singularly devoid of the usual sentimental demonstration which is generally supposed to belong to that sort of thing. Joan had never felt very warmly toward him, for their natures were utterly different. Perhaps it really would have been an unhappy marriage. However that was, it was certainly a great sigh that the girl gave as she rose and went heavily up to her own room. The evening's confession to her father she dreaded unspeakably. But at least it need not be made until after dinner. Half an hour later she was crying over a neatly tied little package which was filled with pretty trinkets, and was addressed to young Van Alyn. Meanwhile

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that youth was wandering aimlessly homeward. The first twenty-four hours after you have been jilted by a girl whom you have once cared enough for to ask in marriage are not the pleasantest in life. Malcolm made a two-mile walk out of one usually five blocks long, not because he wanted to think, but because he felt that he must keep moving. He met no one whom he knew, and gradually drifted into the bluest of reveries, from which he was startled by a thought which had come to him as Niagara might appear to a man dying of thirst. Its contemplation was absolutely satisfying, but itself was overpoweringly impossible. He went swiftly homeward trying to distance his sudden, hopeless hope.

He found his mother alone in the library. Malcolm had always been fond of this gentle lady, but now he remembered how little attention he had paid her during the last weeks. It struck him as something strange and new to see how old she looked.

"Why, mother! are you ill?"

Mrs. Van Alyn read his thoughts. "No, dear. I am no worse than usual. You do not realize how hard the last few weeks have been to me. Marie—you know, and then—other things."

Malcolm went over and stood before her, regarding her tenderly. "What other things?" he said.

She shook her head and smiled a little. "Nothing. But you, Malcolm. You have something to tell me, I think."

His cheeks flushed suddenly. "I have a hard headache," he said. And indeed it was true; the cognac was taking effect.

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"Is that all?"

"J—Miss Howard has given me back her engagement ring."

Mrs. Van Alyn rose quickly. "What—what do you mean?"

"Our engagement is broken."

"Oh! Malcolm!"

She said no more than this to him, but those two words may be pronounced with an infinite variety of expression. I should get into serious difficulty should I attempt to describe just how they sounded from her lips; but this much must be admitted—disappointment and sorrow were not large factors in their intricate composition.

CHAPTER XX

MONDAY EVENING.

Never perhaps has the Auditorium held a more brilliant audience than the one which assembled there on this Monday evening. Every seat in the body of the house was occupied when the curtain rose upon the first gay scene of "La Traviata." The place looked like the show-rooms of some famous French milliner just after the departure of a noted purchaser. And the glowing toilets of the women were thrown into effective relief by the sober background of black suits and white shirts of the men who were scattered thickly through the audience. The boxes were not filled early, but nearly half of them were occupied by the time that Violetta made her entrance in the wonderful ball dress of pale pink satin, with its heavy embroidery of gold.

Joan and Herbert Stagmar arrived before their guests, but they were closely followed by Mr. and Mrs. Kent and Edith. Five minutes later came Mr. and Mrs. Van Alyn, with Eleanor Felton, to the box next to them on the left. The two young ladies, Joan and Edith, were not good foils for each other. Neither one could show to any advantage where the fiery hair and gray eyes were in close juxtaposition to the pale yellow locks and eyes of icy blue. Joan

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wore the dress in which she had made her *début*, and it had passed through too many balls and receptions to be fresh. Nevertheless, it was the most becoming evening dress she had ever worn, and she had clung to it so assiduously that society had come to take it for granted and expect her in it. And wonderfully well she had looked at home in it, where its every fold had found its place upon her slender and graceful figure. Her ornaments were pearls, and she wore them in numbers too great for a young girl. There was not a spot of color anywhere about her dress, and unusually little in her lips. It was strange to see the stir which her quiet, almost languorous entrance created in the audience. She sank into her seat under the glances leveled from a hundred lorgnettes. She felt that she was an entire success, and her manner grew accordingly more indifferent.

When Edith Kent came in she was in singularly good spirits. She had looked forward with extraordinary pleasure to this first night of the opera, and she betrayed it now. She was utterly unlike her usual self, being lively, gay, and a little affected. She showed also a marked contrast to Miss Howard in the careful freshness of her costume. She was in a cloudy dress of pale rose satin shimmering faintly through a shower of silver gauze. A spider of small diamonds on one shoulder, and a great bouquet of daybreak carnations, completed her ensemble effectively. She appeared suddenly as the *débutante*, Joan as the many-wintered society girl. Mrs. Kent was singularly impressive in black velvet, lace, and diamonds, which, to her high indignation, made her look a trifle older

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than she was. When Chatsworth, the third gentleman of the party, entered the box, he glanced at the little group of ladies with great approval and artistic appreciation.

The short first act was drawing to a close. Joan Howard had been guilty of turning three times to look into the Van Alyn box to see whether Courtenay had yet arrived. She became impatient. The applause which greeted the duet between Melba and Campanari irritated her unaccountably. Eleanor Felton was watching her with cynical amusement, Mrs. Van Alyn with covert curiosity. Neither of them liked Joan, and Joan knew this, and was therefore comfortless in their presence. Little Doctor Kent, who was suffering agonies from tight boots, admired Miss Howard, but thought her dress soiled. Mrs. Kent had been over-cordial, Edith cold, and Bromler Van Alyn had, to tell the truth, not noticed her at all. He was too bored to look around much, and was, besides, calculating interest. Thus Joan's early evening was passing badly.

The curtain dropped on the first act, and as it lifted again to reveal the triumphant Violetta, the applause was augmented from the foyer behind the boxes by the clapping of two pairs of masculine hands. Joan was roused from some disagreeable thoughts by the sound of Edith's voice:

"Oh! you are very late, Malcolm. Good evening, Mr. Courtenay. We had begun to think that both of you were lost for the evening."

Joan did not look around. She was bowing pleas-

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antly to an imaginary friend in the audience. Her father's voice came to her then:

"Glad to see you, Robert. Come in, Malcolm Sit down and entertain these young ladies while the doctor and I speak to Mrs. Van Alyn."

Malcolm entered the box, looked uneasily toward Joan, and then sat down by Edith. Courtenay hesitated before he went to Miss Howard, but as Mrs. Kent, still in pursuit of her fad, was eagerly conversing with the artist, there was nothing else to be done.

Young Van Alyn's face was not flushed, but neither his hands nor his nerves were steady. He was angry to perceive how carefully Courtenay watched him, angrier still that he knew it to be necessary, since he was not quite positive what he was saying. He regretted a very recent "little dinner" in Courtenay's rooms heartily now.

As for Courtenay, he was amused with his brother-in-law. Many a time had he helped Malcolm through a dilemma, but never had he seen him in a more trying situation. Robert himself was well toned up for the rest of the night. He had been roused by wine sufficiently to appreciate Joan's long-lashed looks at him, and had the daring to make one or two risque remarks to her, which she received with nervous dissatisfaction.

The intermission was over. The two young men, returning to their places, stopped outside for a moment to smile at one another significantly. Malcolm laid his hand heavily on the shoulder of the other:

"By ——! Bob, she's glorious, isn't she?"

"Rather catty, but overpowering to a degree."

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"Pshaw! I don't mean *her*. I was referring to—to Edith."

Courtenay burst into a mocking laugh. "You have a talent for the on and off. How many do you usually keep in the running? Is Clairette to be reduced to despair already?"

"Shut up, Bob! Don't mention the creature. My eyes are all right, are they?" And with this Malcolm, like a dutiful son, went in to greet his mother affectionately.

The next act was a trifle stupid except for the interest in Violetta's hat. During the whole of it Courtenay talked to Eleanor Felton, whose wit amused him mightily. Malcolm sat in a back corner of the box, moodily studying Miss Kent's profile, and wishing that he had not agreed to go to the club that night. Joan was intensely bored. If this were opera, it was certainly not to her taste. Besides that, she was chagrined to feel that Edith was highly astonished at Malcolm's curt good evening to her, and she meditated on the possibility of removing a glove on some pretext, that the absence of her solitaire might be noted. Moreover she was, strangely enough, furiously jealous of Edith, wretched about Malcolm, displeased with herself, but firmly determined to accomplish something with Courtenay before the evening's end. He was not yet aware of her broken engagement. The news of that might perhaps startle him into some admission, but it was only a chance. At least he seemed to her to be in a propitious mood. In reality it was quite the contrary.

The act ended, and the second intermission began.

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Courtenay came to the side of the box, and leaning upon the rail, began talking to Mrs. Kent, who received his attention complacently. Joan's hands shook with disappointment as she replied sweetly to Bromler Van Alyn's forced remarks. Edith and Malcolm were again together, and Robert appeared to have settled down comfortably to a twenty-minute anecdote of Mrs. J. Bartwick's. With one ear, however, and his whole mind, Courtenay was devoting himself to the conversation of his brother-in-law and Miss Kent. It gave him much to think of.

"Joan is unusually pale to-night, Malcolm."

"Yes—perhaps."

"Well, then, do you know, I actually dressed just as I had fancied myself in my dream."

Courtenay bowed absently, and strained his ears to catch Edith's next remark.

"It is rather too bad of you, Mal, to leave her to the mercies of her father-in-law to be, who is plainly anxious to get back to his meditations."

"I was a little nervous about directing my coachman to this street, for I most certainly had heard one or two gentlemen speak of it vulgarly, but I was quite ignorant of what it was. Even when I said 'Gray Street' to my coachman, I imagined he looked a trifle strange."

Courtenay smiled covertly to himself, and murmured, "Surely not!"

"Edith, I—I don't know—perhaps I am not the one to tell you—nevertheless, Joan Howard will never be my father's daughter-in-law."

"Oh!" said Edith, softly, and Robert longed to

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see her face. He, too, had said "Oh!" in a man's language when Malcolm made his embarrassed announcement. But Mrs. Kent seemed to be arriving somewhere near to the point of her narrative.

"We drove through an extremely disagreeable locality, indeed. I pulled the curtains over the coupé windows."

Courtenay had lost something of the other conversation. When he returned to it Malcolm was speaking. "No, it really is broken. Otherwise I should never have mentioned it. It seems a long time since—"

"Do you regret it, then?" Edith asked too quickly.

"Have you forgotten our conversation the day—I came to you?"

"No, Malcolm. No; I shall never forget."

"But when we reached Gray Street we found it delightfully quiet. I was quite pleased. It was poor, of course, but really almost pleasant. My footmen got down and asked if I wished to stop anywhere. I said no, but for them to drive slowly past one hundred and forty-three.

" 'Never,' Edith?"

Courtenay glanced quickly around to get his glass from the chair behind. Could it be possible that Malcolm's hand lay upon Edith Kent's white glove?

Again did graceless Courtenay smile as he asked of Mrs. Kent, "And did you see the 'one whom you knew and did not know,' as you drove by?"

A puzzled look came over Mrs. Kent's face when she, as she usually did, admitted the pointlessness of her tale. "Oh, no. I am positive that there was no

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truth in that. It must have been a mistake. But I did see some one there."

"Oh! You really did then. Who was it?"

"Oh, you must not think of the dream now, indeed you must not. It was dear Doctor Snippington. He was down there on an errand of charity, of course."

Robert's face betrayed a mixture of interest, actual astonishment, and amusement as he replied with glittering eyes: "Oh, certainly. And what did you do then, Mrs. Kent?"

"I asked him if I might not drive him back with me. The poor fellow was on foot."

"And did he go?"

"Yes; I finally persuaded him. He seemed to prefer walking at first. He delights in denying himself every pleasure! Dear man!"

"Do you know what Gray Street is, Mrs. Kent?"

Mrs. Kent looked at him, trying hard to read his impenetrable expression. Then she answered in embarrassed haste, "Oh, certainly. Are not those the Loring girls, opposite?"

"May I call to-morrow, Edith?"

"Oh, I don't know, Malcolm. Perhaps, if you care to."

"Expect me at three. You will be alone?"

And Edith did not answer, but nodded quietly as the curtain rose on the third act.

During the card-scene Courtenay did not look at the stage after his moment of inspection of Violetta's gown. Immediately after her entrance he settled back with his face to the audience to wrestle with a few disturbing thoughts of his own. His eyes strayed

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often to Joan Howard's drooping face. Why had she acted as she had? What had she done? What but thrown Robert Courtenay, the self-assured, into such a state of irritation, perplexity, debate, indecision, and uneasiness that for the first time in his entire life he was thoroughly at outs with himself. She had broken her engagement with Van Alyn—why? A flicker of vanity as well as annoyance showed in his eyes as he asked that question. He had not studied her character profoundly—Courtenay thought too little of any woman for that—but he believed her capable of loving only her master. Her master? Who was that? Answer, thou Alter Ego! But Courtenay's Alter Ego refused to answer. It was afraid. Robert Courtenay was a widower, and free. A widower. He raised his slender white hand to the hair which was no longer coal black, and frowned to himself. Joan Howard—how beautiful she was. Bah! Beauty as opposed to freedom, such a freedom as his? No; impossible to sacrifice too much. Yet once he had forgotten himself before her. That was dangerous. What was it he had said? "God! I love you!" Ho! melodramatic enough. Had her head been turned by that five minutes? If so, it must be twisted back again. No, no. Courtenay's animation was dying now. Joan Howard must not be allowed to regard him as she evidently did. Could she fascinate him into marrying her? Courtenay came near laughing aloud. "I must stop this," he said; "I can manage it and, more, I will."

Courtenay, have you stopped yet to ask if—you love Helen's daughter?

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The third act was ended. The moment that the after-applause had died away Courtenay crossed into the next box again and seated himself beside and a little behind Joan Howard.

Joan was clapping with apparent enthusiasm as Melba and Campanari reappeared. She paid not the slightest attention to the man whom she knew perfectly well was close to her. But her heart was beating triumphantly at that knowledge.

"It seems to come up to your anticipations, Miss Howard."

She looked around with an atom of surprise in her face. "It is truly charming," she replied, with hidden bitterness.

"My presence seems to annoy you, Joan."

Miss Howard stared at him haughtily. "To my acquaintances, Mr. Courtenay, I am Miss Howard."

"Certainly—Joan," he responded, easily.

At this she looked at him undecidedly. Both of them were beginning to understand that he could always ride over her when he chose to use a little persistence. This time was no exception to the rule. Joan saw his face and laughed, unguardedly. Courtenay also laughed, and in an unbeautiful manner, as Joan Howard knew. It was well for Courtenay's secret cause and ill for his daughter's happiness that Stagmar had a moment before left the box to pay a call upstairs. Robert, having Joan Howard now pliable and under his influence, proceeded to carry out his plan. His manner was always indifferent, his voice even, nonchalant, unpleasant.

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"I have only just heard something which is no longer news, I imagine, Miss Howard."

Joan twisted a little nervously. "What's that?"

"So coyly at a loss to guess? Save us from the vagaries of a pretty woman! Did my ardent and youthful brother-in-law refuse to assume the conjugal responsibility of your eyes and money, after all?"

Joan gave him one quick glance, and then turned uneasily away for a moment. Even she would not much longer endure the continued insult hidden in the tones of the man for whose honest love she would have dared the world. But how make others join in a conversation where he might choose to continue in the same manner toward her? The girl did him warranted injustice now. And she could not order him away. She had not force enough, in his presence, for that. While these thoughts sped through her mind, Courtenay read them. This was a hard task for him. Inwardly he burned with shame; outwardly he gave no sign.

"Why should you speak to me in that way? What right have you? I suppose that you were referring to my broken engagement to Malcolm."

"Precisely. You are really becoming astute. Um—may I ask if you have done me the honor to make me responsible for the dear boy's desperate unhappiness?" Here Courtenay glanced laughingly over his shoulder to young Van Alyn, whose face was eagerly lighted by the words he was speaking to Edith Kent.

Joan shook with helpless anger and mortification.

"What—what do you mean?" she faltered.

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He lowered his handsome head over her as he answered, in a low, mocking tone, at the same time restraining himself from bending before her in earnest contrition, "Was it, I mean, for love of me that you threw over Van Alyn?"

The girl started up. "Robert Courtenay! How—"

"Hush! Don't make a scene. It's true, isn't it?"

She did not answer, but sat looking at him dazedly.

"Well, listen, then. If it was on my account, you shall not be disappointed. Here I make you a formal proposal for your hand. Will you marry me, a six-weeks' widower? Must I say the usual extravagant things? Of course, I love you in quite the unusual way. Let us dispense with the rest of the nonsense. The answer, I have no doubt, is 'yes'?"

Choking away a hysterical sob, Joan looked at him in a fury. "I hate you! I despise you from the bottom of my heart! So long as I live I hope never to see you again. When you are sober I expect a written apology. Go—away!"

Her last words showed her so upon the verge of tears that Courtenay rose in very pity. At the same moment the first notes of the dismal last act sounded from the orchestra. The man who had for the past ten minutes been playing so despicable a part went through the hall, and with a bare excuse and good night to his hostess hurried down the marble stairs and out into the raw, drizzling night. He hated himself just now, did the doughty Courtenay, and as he mopped his brow he groaned in an agony: "Well—it's done. I'm free, and she has escaped. But not for anything in the universe would I do a thing like that

CHAPTER XXI

THE HAUNT OF ANOTHER LIFE.

One evening, about the middle of the first week of opera, Stagmar went from his solitary dinner-table straight outside to a footmanless brougham. Ulster, cap, and gloveless hands announced his plebeianism for the night. Joan was fortunately at an opera dinner, and her father at liberty to go where he liked, free from any thought of her loneliness. Perkins, on the box, gave no sign when he heard the destination of their drive, but after the master was inside and they had started away, he chuckled a little, inwardly, did Perkins the astute. For gentlemen's drivers come to know some places by reputation quite as well as the masters. This particular domicile was frequented by the greatest and best—those who dressed best, Perkins meant. But, though Mr. Robert Courtenay and Mr. Stillwell Drew were said to have come to blows in its select little hallway, still Perkins, as a loyal and devoted attendant, vowed that he would have put up all his ready money on the master, if the master had only the foresight to have worn his top coat, tall hat, and evening suit to-night instead of the old, threadbare rambling rig.

"Ladies," had Perkins once observed, in a confidential mood, to George, his whilom assistant, "ladies

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has eyes for cloes. Now, look at Miss Howard. It's off with young Van Alyn, to my thinkin' all on account o' his visitin' her afternoons in his business suit. An' in my position I have opportunities of noticin'."

But Herbert Stagmar was not thinking of his apparel. He was going to see his wife. He sat in the brougham, his head on one hand, staring vacantly out of the window, and failing to note many acquaintances whom he had not known in those enthusiastic, far-off days of which he dreamed.

Stagmar alighted heavily at the door of the apartment building. Perkins watched him with furtive curiosity and marveled at his reluctance. Why was he not in eager haste? But Perkins bowed blankly and drove away when his employer informed him that he should walk home later. It was not a cold night, and he should not have minded waiting.

Stagmar ascended the flights of stairs slowly. It was but the fourth of these visits that he had made, but he dreaded them, as things monotonously tragic. Fifine opened the door, and he drew back a little at the blaze of light which met him. The room glared with lamps, and he had come up from cool darkness. Helen was dressing, he was told, and would be out in a moment. He nodded and turned wearily from the gaudily tricked out maid. When Fifine disappeared into another room the sound of an exclamation came from within it. In another moment the dancer stood before her husband.

She seemed to the dazed, half-sick man before her like some strange, feverish vision. She was dressed

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in a long-trained evening gown of crimson satin, which, in an inexplicable manner seemed to harmonize with the red of her carelessly arranged hair. Here and there on the dress one caught a shimmer of white. Her wonderful neck blazed with diamonds—whether false or real mattered not. And over the whole costume, as if with a wish to conceal the startling colors, was thrown a shawl of fine black lace.

Her husband, as he turned toward her, examined her curiously. He could remember the time when it had been her delight to pose in some such array for the elder Chatsworth, who had pronounced her more beautiful than archangel or arch-temptress, while he, Stagmar, and Jim Kent had looked on contentedly. She came forward, still slowly, reading in his face the mixture of admiration, pity, and disgust which he so strongly felt. Then she spoke.

"Why did you come at night—and this evening of them all? I did not want you ever to see me so!"

"Then why are you so?" coldly.

"My sins as scarlet are," she responded, half sadly, half lightly. "It is my nature. Will you sit down?"

"Not for long. I merely came, as usual, to see that you wanted for nothing, and that you were gaining in strength. Doubtless you are awaiting company more welcome than I."

She watched him steadily as he sat down, then she drew another chair up and seated herself, still without speaking. Her husband was silent, also, for he perceived that she had something which she was nerving herself to say. He dreaded it, but waited.

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"Listen, Herbert. I am expecting people to-night—yes, a great many, both men and women. I have asked them all to come. They will laugh and rejoice with me, and drink to my successful convalescence and to my approaching—return to the stage."

Stagmar sprang to his feet. "Helen—explain."

"There is nothing to explain. I have danced for many years, from choice. I shall dance for many more now, from necessity. I know that you dislike me—more, cannot endure me. Well, then, it kills me to accept support from you. I will be independent, Herbert. And Jim Kent has pronounced me well."

"Kills you to accept support from me—your husband? Why?"

"My husband! Ah, if you were my husband—"

"And am I not?"

"No, Herbert, except in name. Names are nothing. I am as a widow. You—you are ashamed of me. If you were not, I should be acknowledged before your world."

This speech of hers was not impassioned. It had not even reproach in it. As she spoke Stagmar had looked at her with the dawn of a new expression. Helen had grown older. Then the writer's throbbing head sank over into his hands. "Let me think," he muttered.

She stood before him, her hands clasped, her eyes pitifully wistful, her face emotionless. There came a sharp ring at the bell. Fifine was heard coming to answer it.

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"Quick! Herbert! You must go!" She ran over to the man, who had not moved.

"Go? Why?"

"There is some one coming. I do not want you to be found here."

He smiled scornfully. "Are they all so jealous?"

"They jealous! Oh, it is for you, Herbert. Can't you understand? I would not have you thought to be a man like them. There is another door that leads into the passage. Come with me."

He followed her silently through two or three rooms until she let him out close to the stairs, through a little, inconspicuous door in the side of an ante-room. Before he departed he turned to her.

"I shall come back to-night when you are alone. I must talk with you about this thing."

Then he was gone, into the night, and La Caralita, her evening of revelry spoiled for her, went back to receive her caller. As she entered the little parlor Snippington stood by the table, the glow from a red shade lighting up his pallid countenance. He hurried toward her with an air of gallantry.

"How beautiful! how beautiful you are, *mea* Helena!" he said, rolling his weak eyes at her.

She threw herself into a chair, looking up and laughing at him forcedly. "Ah, if I believed that you never said such things to any one else!" she said.

"To whom would I say them?" he asked, smiling consciously. For of all things the divine loved to be thought a lady-killer.

"How should I know?" she returned, somewhat too carelessly.

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"To be sure, indeed. How *should* you know? You are alone to-night?" he continued, looking about at all the lights.

"Just now, yes, except for you. Later a good many people will be in. I didn't know you were coming. You should have sent word." This last phrase contained a good deal of ironical deference.

"What people?" he asked, quickly.

"Oh, I can't tell you exactly. Some that you might know. By the way, I've some news for you."

"For me? What?"

"Philip has had an offer to go to Philadelphia to be trained in the choir of a new cathedral there. They are trying voices everywhere in the country. They were satisfied with Philip."

"Thank the Lord! Oh, this is good! To have him out of the way—when does he go?"

La Caralita shrugged her shoulders, and looked lazily at Snippington's eager face. "He is not going at all. I choose to keep him here with me."

For a moment Snippington stared at her insolence, then leaped to his feet white with rage. "Fool! Idiot! Beast! Devil that you are! Are you going to make the little brute stay here to keep my reputation forever on the verge of ruin?"

Helen was now sitting up very straight. She broke in upon him without hesitation, but still with some indifference of manner: "Beg my pardon, Snip, for the words you just spoke, or leave my rooms at once. Perhaps you have forgotten how little you can afford to vent your fury out on me. Remember that I have plenty of power over you."

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themselves for an hour or so till their ranks could be completed by the arrival of a dozen or two artists of the "legitimate." Meantime pipes, cigars, and cigarettes were produced from the pockets of every man, and two or three preliminary bottles were opened by one of the gentlemen. From his place of concealment Snippington heard with longing the delicate thud of the corks as they came from the slender necks of the white-sealed bottles. He had a sharp ear for sounds like these, poor fellow. And indeed it was a most trying situation for a holy man to be shut into a dark, small room, whence he dares not emerge, while directly outside his hostess chatters gayly with a dozen luckier—and less saintly men, whose conversation he cannot hear, but the clink of whose glasses penetrates most fascinatingly to his thirsty solitude.

La Caralita, who lacked neither imagination nor humor, pictured this little scene out to herself, and laughed so heartily at one of Drew's poorest sallies that Courtenay glowered angrily into his glass and flung himself over to talk with a small neglected artist in a corner. Now the company was increased by the entrance of half a dozen ballet girls, who had come over from the "Grand," with their escorts; all giddily and tawdrily dressed and covered with long cloaks. They were the favorite dancers of a large company, and were received with shouts of welcome and mirth. One of the party, named Coralie, rushed immediately over to Courtenay, who was none too pleased with her attentions. Clairette had also come, and looked poutingly about for Malcolm Van Alyn. He not being there, she was forced to content herself with

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Garth and a cigarette man, with whom she seemed to do very well. La Caralita was the warmest of hostesses, and to her was given the bulk of homage and devotion. Indeed, so assured was her position among them all that not a single woman dreamed of jealousy of her. The doors of this castle of Bohemia were too seldom throw open to the ordinary dwellers of the realm for it to be anything but a privilege to go there. For Helen Howard's name was spoken in reverent whispers among her own class as an associate of the really great.

By midnight the small rooms were in an uproar. A supper table had been contrived by the men, and even now it was covered with a litter of half-empty bottles, soiled glasses, heaps of cigar ashes, and spilled wine. Seven or eight still sat about it amid the remains of unwholesome-looking food, not with a desire to eat more, but for the sake of having a resting place for superfluous elbows. Everybody in the room was drinking. Coralie sat close beside Courtenay, laughing at his disgusted search for a clean glass, she having solved the problem by tilting a bottle to her mouth. Garth was relating a spicy anecdote in tenderly loud tones to Clairette, who was engaged in flinging occasional little showers from her champagne glass upon his thin hair. This action gave the lawyer, who was looking on from a corner with a chianti flask in either hand, a worthy idea.

"Come! A baptism and christening!" he yelled sonorously, rushing over to Garth and dragging him

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to the middle of the floor to bow, which he did in a pleasantly maudlin fashion.

These words reached the ears of the recumbent Snippington in the adjoining room. What in heaven's name would they do now? He shuddered. Had they by any possible chance discovered Philip? Were they amusing themselves with him? Would they find out—anything? These thoughts rushed through his head in a torrent. Now he was relieved, as he could hear a part of the next exclamations:

"Little Tommy Garth! Good Tommy! W'ats yer name, Tommy? Yer middle name? Ho there! Poor little fellow! Hasn't got his hair yet!" Then for a long three minutes came absolute silence, followed by a few mumbled words from the lawyer, a gasp and a curse from Garth, and a scream of laughter from the entire company.

The little man had been soaked with a deluge of stale wine of every sort from twenty glasses and a dozen bottles. He was also exceedingly angry, and departed shortly for fresher air, vowing vengeance upon the lawyer in a stream of expressive language which the entreaties of the deserted Claire failed utterly to assuage. This departure was considered the crowning success of a highly original joke, and the lawyer, taking to himself full credit for the affair, felt entitled to a fresh bottle of Pommery Sec, which reduced him not long after to somewhat deplorable circumstances.

Stillwell Drew was the only one who was displeased with the incident. For Courtenay took advantage of the general confusion to usurp a place at the feet of

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Helen, who had been hitherto occupied by his rival. He had rid himself of Coralie, and was now content, let Drew scowl as he would. Robert's dark head rested dreamily on the brilliant folds of La Caralita's train as he half sat, half lay upon the floor, leaning against her chair. One of her slender hands lay in his, his fiery eyes glowed up to hers, and they spoke rarely. So they sat, almost alone in that company, until their attention was attracted by the next move of the guests.

One of the men had asked for dancing, and Clairette, who had come over in her theater costume, complied. Drew seized a guitar, and the rest grouped themselves into a chorus about the sweet-toned, thin-voiced little instrument. Clairette caught hold of her skirts, there was a shout and clapping, and for the next twenty minutes the little figure swayed and whirled through a labyrinth of steps in a slow serpentine dance of the East. Perhaps it was an imitation of Helen Howard, but it was nevertheless well done. When she stopped finally, her breath gone, her cheeks aflame, her little audience was duly appreciative. But Courtenay was disturbed when Helen arose. She breathed very quickly, and her eyes shone. Patting Clairette's shoulder absently, she cried in an eager voice, "Wait for me!" then ran to her room.

Behind her rang out a clamor of exclamations. Every one knew that La Caralita, whose genius at this art had brought her tributes from an entire royal world, and for whom throngs had asked in vain for months past, was to make her first appearance now, before them. And these friends of hers recognized

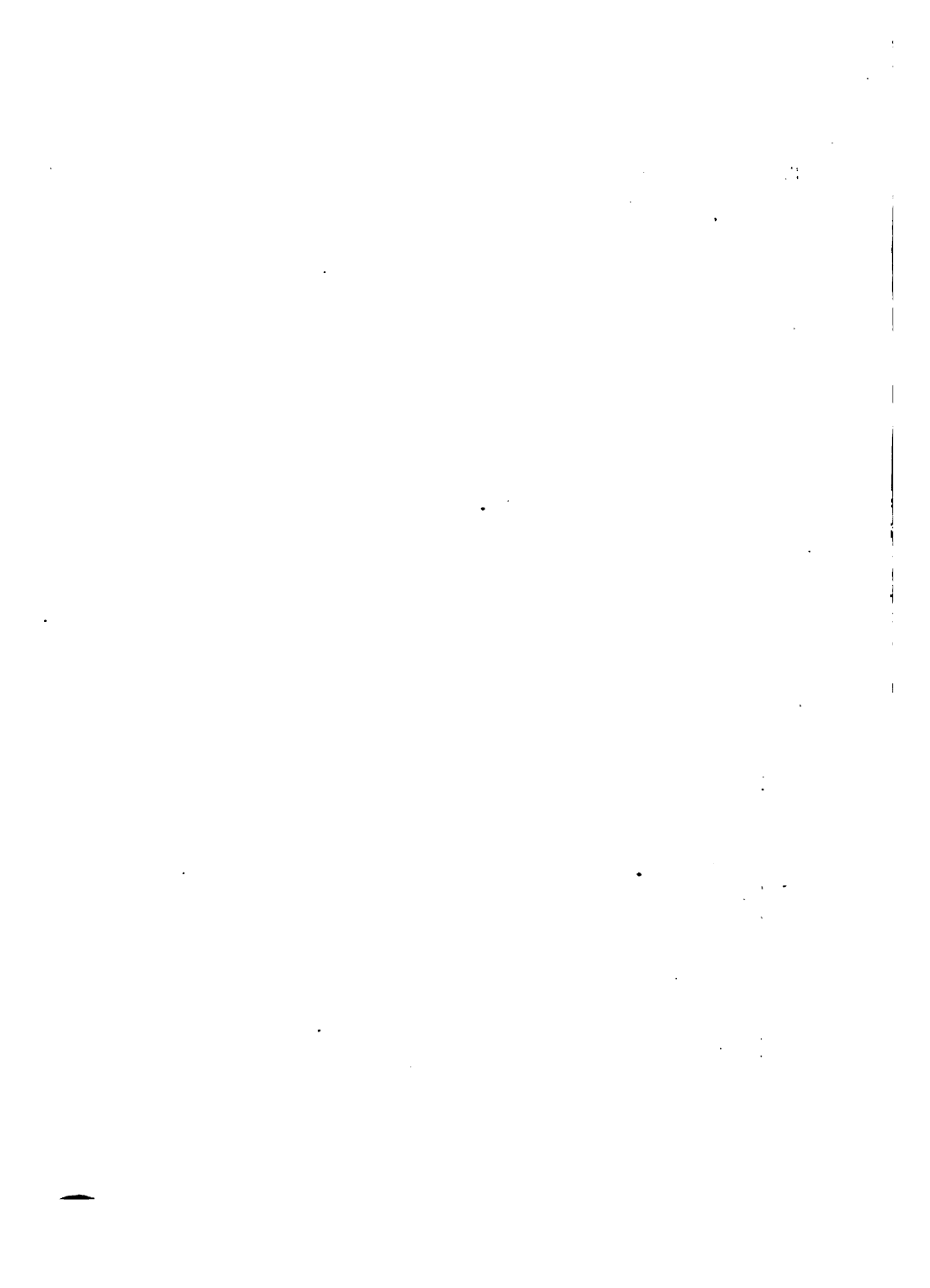
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and appreciated the honor she did them. They waited eagerly for her to come out, and scarcely a word was spoken while she dressed.

When La Caralita appeared again before her guests she was all in white, from head to foot. The waist of her costume was of white satin, glittering with gold embroidery. Her enormously wide skirt was accordion pleated, and beneath it a dozen petticoats of filmy white gauze now hid and now revealed the delicate outlines of her slender limbs, which were covered with white silk tights. Upon her bright hair rested a little Moorish cap of the same white and gold, and in one hand she carried a tiny white tambourine, from which, by long loops of satin ribbon, hung a score of little jangling golden bells. With cheeks flushed and eyes unduly brilliant she threw herself lovingly into the old poise, and to the simple guitar accompaniment, went through that series of motions which had once made an enthusiastic admirer compare her to a combination of Venus, Terpsichore, and the serpent of Eve. On and on she went, now rapidly, now slowly, until she fairly filled the rooms as with a full white cloud. Into her dancing she could throw all the joy that she had ever known. Her spectators breathed deeply and quickly. Was it really her art or only her magnetism which filled them? Perhaps in dancing she gave out the best of herself, and it was this that had made her name a living one over all the civilized world.

She danced not longer than ten minutes, but to her audience it had been hours and yet no time at all. When she stopped she was pallid, nearly exhausted,





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but perfectly happy. Four months of idleness had in no way diminished her old powers. It was her great triumph when, with common consent, the men about her lifted her in their arms, and on their shoulders carried her to the table, standing her on top of it. Then, grouped all about below her, every soul there raised a glass and drank to her honor and devotion. Now loudly they cried for her to speak, but with a little tremulous laughter she descended again. into Courtenay's arms, her face as white as death. Drew poured out for her a glass of brandy, which she gratefully accepted. She was not yet entirely convalescent. Seeing her faintness, the rest made preparations to go. And a few moments later, as the neighboring clocks struck two, Helen Howard was alone in her rooms save for the two men, Robert Courtenay and Stillwell Drew—ay, and Snippington waiting in the room beyond.

The rivals stood eyeing each other angrily as Fifine came in answer to her mistress's call. Neither would make the first move to go. La Caralita watched them for a moment, then said calmly:

"Good-night, gentlemen. I thank you both for having been my guests. You have made my evening very pleasant."

"Good-night," said Drew at once, bending low over her hand, and Courtenay, with scarce perceptible hesitation, followed him.

A moment later and the men were gone, but Fifine noted, without mentioning the fact, that upon the table rested Courtenay's meerschaum in its pale velvet case, and that Drew's large horn corkscrew, which

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was inlaid in gold, lay among the litter of glasses. The humorous little point in these things, however, escaped the maid's notice. The impending interview with Snippington filled her, as it did her mistress, with both apprehension and dread. And to-night, of all nights, the dancer was in no way fitted to cope with this man. But she well knew the storm of abuse with which she would presently be greeted, for Helen had long since been forced to recognize the real character of Snip, the divine.

"Well, Ffine," said La Caralita, with as much nonchalance as she could command, "let Doctor Snippington out now."

CHAPTER XXII

"MR. COURTENAY,—DOCTOR SNIPPINGTON."

Fifine said not a word, but carefully opened the door and went into the room where Titus Emollitus Snippington lay.

Two minutes later he came staggering sleepily into the disordered apartment where the orgy had taken place. "Umph!" he remarked, looking about him.

"It's late, Snip," said Helen, wearily. "Hadn't you better get a cab now and go back to your own rooms?"

"Many thanks!" he sneered. "You've kept me penned up like a beast in a cage all night, while you and the rest of them raised the dickens. Now, it's my turn. Fifine! Where is the crea—oh! Fifine, bring me something to eat and a couple of bottles!"

"Snippington—please—"

"Hold your tongue, Helen. I'm master here just at present. I shall stay until I choose to go, and you stay here with me to keep me company and amuse me. Was it Fifine with the guitar?"

La Caralita's eyes blazed with fury. She stood before him imperiously: "You miserable cur! Go! Out of my rooms!"

Snippington sneered at her, and laughed in an ugly fashion, as already, in her exhaustion, Helen weak-

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ened. Fifine, not daring to disobey, set the food before him and brought him two bottles of champagne. The clergyman kissed her wantonly for the service, and then lay back in his chair, laughing with harsh mirthlessness as she violently rubbed her cheek.

"So! You pretty idiot! You don't love me as you do the gallant Courtenay? Well—you shan't escape easily, then. Don't be impatient. Come—another glass."

Helen looked up at him in amazement. This unusual mood was infinitely worse to her than his ordinary vehemence. And as she watched his small, pinched face, she realized suddenly the position in which she and the frail thing whom she called Fifine stood. The one almost utterly lacking in bodily strength, the other devoid of courage, they were both at the mercy of an animal. At thought of this Helen's nerves suddenly gave way, and she broke into a passion of hysterical sobs. Snippington, fork in hand, watched her for several moments curiously, while the maid, nervous and pallid, stood hesitating between them. Then Snippington remarked, with his ordinary gentleness, "Get up, fool. Stop choking. You make me ill."

La Caralita did not stop. Would any woman have done so? But the clergyman was in earnest. With the weaker ones he never hesitated to show himself strong. To-night his temper was worse than usual. He was jealous, chilly, and intensely sleepy. The revel which had taken place earlier, every sound of which he had noted, had roused all that discontent at the limitations put upon his calling which had long

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lain dormant in him. Now, thrusting away the champagne bottle, and throwing his empty glass aside, he strode over to the spot where Helen crouched. Taking her by the shoulders he lifted her by main strength, despite her struggles, and carried her to the table. Helen let no sound escape her, but she was quivering in every nerve of her body. The room was perfectly noiseless. Snippington was taking breath and deciding upon his next move. Suddenly to the woman's ears came a sound—the most delicious sound that ever reached her ears. It was the faint grating of a key in the lock of the outer door. Snippington, not being acute of sense, heard nothing. Again, absent-mindedly, he filled his glass. But already Fifine was running to the door.

When, early on that evening, Herbert Stagmar had left his wife, he did not go home. His mind was not in a state to rest. Blindly he had wandered down through the city, around and back through the lowest quarters, which he had long known well. He had not intended returning to his wife's rooms until far later, but the more he thought upon her situation for the night, the center of a group of Bohemians, whose reckless spirit he knew only too well himself, the more he desired to be within her reach and near enough to her to insure her safety. Beyond this he was nervously anxious to talk with her. Her hasty admission that she was about to return to the stage had affected him strongly. He would do all within his power now to keep this woman whom he had once loved from entering again upon a public

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career. And then, while he was still musing sadly over her position, came the sudden relentless knowledge that he could save her from an inevitable end if he would. It would mean to him the sacrifice of everything that he now held high, and—and for years already Helen Stagmar had danced before the world. This last voice Stagmar did not stop to reason with. Time had passed since then, they were no longer young, and life wore another aspect. Stagmar had long since learned that human souls are somehow permitted to mingle in an inextricable jumble with each other. Not one is cut exactly to fit its place. And in those far-off days he had been hard—she, young and marvelously beautiful. Ah! Whatever society and society's god might think, Helen Howard had had some excuse for her waywardness. So cried the writer to himself, there in the throbbing night.

After all, it was a quarter to two before Herbert stood once more in the lower hallway of the apartment building, waiting. The lights still shone in her rooms, and presently a few people, men for the most part, came down the stairs in straggling groups. At length, for several minutes no one passed. Stagmar still hesitated to go up. Then he saw and recognized two men, Robert Courtenay and Stillwell Drew, come down the steps and disappear together round the first corner outside. For five minutes more he waited patiently, then crossed the street to look up once again at those windows which this time he hoped to find dark. Dark? Still they gleamed forth with a multitude of lights, and across one curtain flickered grotesquely the shadow of a man. Some low excla-

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mation escaped the lips of the dancer's husband. Why should he be so tried? Who was it now? Not Courtenay—the favorite. Who, then? Ah! He caught a profile view of the man, with his neatly clipped side-whiskers. It was the rector of St. Matthew's. Stagmar's blue eyes blazed with anger.

The writer crossed the street blindly, almost running, actuated by a reckless motive. As he regained the hall, and before his foot had been set upon the first stair, the tall, slender figure of a man darted into the doorway, followed almost instantly by a second, shorter one.

"Courtenay!" gasped the second.

"Well, Drew, how are you?" and Robert burst into a laugh.

Stagmar, unperceived, moved into a dark corner.

"Why have you come here?" inquired the dark-browed one, in an annoyed tone.

"I have, most unfortunately, forgotten to bring away my meerschaum. But you—if I may ask?—why have you returned?"

"Curiously enough I left my corkscrew on the wine-table. I felt obliged to return for it, since I value it somewhat highly."

There was a moment's pause; then Courtenay said, grinning in the dark: "Well, Drew, we're both sold. May as well make the best of the matter. Neither of us will retreat, I suppose. Come along up with me. Helen's very tired, anyhow."

Drew, seeing that there was no help for it, nodded, and following the other, they passed together up and out of sight. Stagmar waited wearily below.

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The two young men arrived at the door of those rooms together, and then stopped, amazed. From within they caught the tones of a man's voice. Courtenay glared around at his companion, with a quick nod of his head toward the door.

"By Jove!" responded Drew with dry lips.

"Who the devil can it be?"

"Possibly some one who happened to forget his cigarette-case," sneered Drew in reply. "Come on; we'd better go."

"Go? Well, no. Upon the whole, I think not. I want a look at the gentleman inside, and besides that I've no desire to present Fifine's last beloved with my pet pipe. Why, man, it's the color of weak coffee already. Not burned a scrap!" With these enthusiastic words, Courtenay saw his companion raise his hand to the bell. Smiling gently, he grasped it and pulled it down. Then, still smiling, he took from his pocket a key which fitted into the lock.

Stillwell Drew and Robert Courtenay entered the rooms together. As they appeared in the doorway of the parlor, Fifine backing before them, a little cry of relief and surprise broke from the dancer's lips.

One moment of utter silence; then, with an unsteady smile, La Caralita said: "Doctor Snappington, let me present Mr. Robert Courtenay and Mr. Stillwell Drew! Gentlemen, the Reverend Titus Emollitus Snappington of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE COURAGE OF TWO.

Quivering apprehensively, Snippington set down his glass. His face was now the color of lead and his eyes were expressionless and glassy. Stupidly he stared at first one and then the other of the two mockingly polite faces before him. It was several minutes before another word was spoken, and during this time a slow realization of the import of this meeting was breaking over Titus Emollitus. Either of these two men might ruin him now at a word if he would. Would they care to take the trouble to do it? This fearful question seemed to be decided by the next words of Helen Howard, who was almost beside herself with weariness, nervousness, and the fear of what this man was going to do next. Moving close to Drew, and staring up into Courtenay's face, she addressed both of them hysterically:

"Aren't you going to take this man away from me? He hates me as I hate him. He is quite capable of murdering me. He is wicked, horrible, worse than any one else. If you can do so, use your influence to take him out of the city. While he is here I shall be in danger. Will you help me?"

As she finished this speech Helen violently clasped Courtenay's arm and held to it as one in agony.

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The two men drew her between them, touched by her evident terror. Each outwardly promised support, each inwardly vowed far more—the ruin of the clergyman, his departure from the city.

Meantime Snippington had stepped forward. In his left hand he held his coat and his hat, with his right he touched the shoulder of the dancer, who shrank from him:

"You, Helen," he said, in a voice harsh from effort to make it sound at all, "and these—these—gentlemen also—I bid you a very good night." So, cold and trembling, Snippington departed.

As he passed down the long flights and through the halls he seemed to detect a strange smell as of a fire. Snippington shook himself and frowned, blaming his imagination for an evil omen; for his creed charged him to believe in hell. At the lower entrance he passed a man wearing a dark coat. It was Stagmar, still waiting miserably.

Five minutes later the two other men, having seen the dancer quieted and in the hands of her maid, followed in the footsteps of Snippington. They spoke but little. Upon reaching the second floor Courtenay suddenly sniffed the air. "Drew!" he said, "do you smell fire?"

"It's smoke!" cried the other instantly.

In fact, by the dim light of the gas jet on the floor above were visible thin curls of blue-black smoke, pouring from the crack of a door opening off the landing. Courtenay applied his shoulder to the door. Then the two men threw themselves against it. As it creaked they drew back only in time to escape a

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giant tongue of flame which leaped out toward them as from a dragon's mouth.

"Good God! Drew! Run and send off the alarm, while I get Helen and the maid down. It's a fire-trap, this place."

By the time Courtenay had finished Drew was half-way down the stairs on his way toward the alarm-box. Courtenay at the same time was darting back up. In one moment he stood again within that much visited little parlor. It was empty.

"Fifine!" he shouted, running toward the door of Helen's bedroom, inside of which a discouraging spectacle met his eyes. The maid was working anxiously over the lifeless form of the dancer, who lay in a dead faint. The strain of the evening had been too much for her, and after the excitement was over, woman fashion, she had given way completely.

"Lord! Mr. Courtenay! What's the matter now? You're white!" said the maid, looking curiously up from her mistress.

"Now, don't you get excited, Fifine. Just leave Miss Howard to me, and hurry along yourself. Don't attempt to save anything. There's a fire downstairs."

"Fire!" gasped the girl, the color underneath the rouge flying from her cheeks. She seemed suddenly helpless. Courtenay grasped her roughly by the shoulders.

"Come, now, don't behave like a fool. I can't carry both of you, and your life depends on yourself. Go on. Get down while you can. Go through whatever you must. It's the only way."

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Then Fífine, with a little cry, ran crazily out of the rooms, and down, down the creaking stairs. So she passes away from our story. Courtenay, left alone with La Caralita, swung her light body to his shoulders and held her there as one would have carried a heavy bundle. Then leaving behind him the fated rooms, he rapidly gained the stairs. If only there were an elevator! This he thought to himself as he peered into the depths far below. Already the lower stories were veiled in swirls of smoke, amidst which, here and there, rose patches of flame. Courtenay's senses seemed trebled in intensity. By leaping downward three steps at a time he quickly gained the second story. Here before him seemed to rise a living wall of flame. A sort of madness came over the man. Shouting aloud a few phrases from a great opera, and holding Helen to his breast to prevent the fire from scorching her flesh, he rushed headlong into and through the flames, arriving on the other side of the seething barrier with hair and brows scorched. Three seconds more and he stood in the street, but even as he stepped from the threshold he felt the whole building tremble and creak in the gigantic force of the heat.

About the entrance, and on the side of the structure farthest from the flames, despite the hour of the morning, a crowd was already collecting. Men and boys of all ages, with here and there a woman among them, had poured up from that part of the city which is the scene of madness by night and filthy want during the day. The dwellers of that quarter are always first to be seen at any happening where tragedy, hor-

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ror, and destruction have a possibility of moving hand in hand. Courtenay rapidly scanned the faces nearest him. Neither Drew nor Fifine was anywhere visible, but, strange as it seemed to Courtenay, Herbert Stagmar was. Robert beckoned him at once, and the writer anxiously hurried forward.

"I cannot understand where the engines are. I rang for them ten minutes ago—"

"Help me a bit here, Herbert. This lady has fainted. Have you a brandy flask about you?" whispered Courtenay, quickly, not caring to attract attention to his burden.

"Ah! La Caralita! Thank God! No, Bob, I haven't any brandy. But she will come to speedily now, I think."

They laid her down in an out-of-the-way corner of the walk, upon their coats, and Stagmar picked up one of her hands to chafe. At the first touch of that strong, light hand, Helen Stagmar quivered, opened her eyes, and looked at him with a dazed smile. "What has happened?" she gasped.

"Fire, my dear," responded Courtenay, pleasantly, from the other side. "But you and Fifine are both out safely—though I don't know where she is just now."

Even in the faint light of the still reluctant flames both men noted the sudden gleam of fear and anxiety that shot into her eyes at Courtenay's words. "Philip!" she cried, convulsively. "Where is Philip! The child! My boy! Surely, you didn't leave him there—"

The two men, Stagmar and Courtenay, glanced

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first at each other, then at the tall building opposite, from one side of which a whirling tower of fire was already rising. Fear lay strong in their eyes. "Philip?" asked Courtenay, vaguely. "Where was he?"

"He slept in the room next to mine. He was asleep. He is only a tiny boy," groaned the dancer, in despairing reply.

"We must get him; I'll try, Helen," answered Courtenay, quickly. But the woman looked up for Stagmar. The writer had disappeared.

Courtenay started silently away, but before he was out of Helen's sight her husband reappeared quietly.

"Some of the men have got hold of a ladder. I have spoken about the child. I shall go up to get him. It is useless to try the inside. The place is a mere shell now." Stagmar went over to Helen. "Good-by," he said. "I will do everything that I can." He looked once into her blind eyes, and then hurried away toward the other side of the burning building. Helen followed at a distance which fear made her keep, but Courtenay was at his side.

"Bert," he said, hurriedly, "I'm going up that ladder instead of you. I told Helen I would."

Stagmar laid his hand for a moment on the other's shoulder as they walked. "You must give me the first chance, Bob. It is possible that more than one trial of it will have to be made."

They were now at the side of the building from which least smoke poured. Gazing upward the two fourth-story windows were still to be seen lighted brilliantly. These were the guiding points, the goal

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which was to be reached by the ascent. The sleeping child lay in a room across that parlor—and—and no one knew how long the floors would last. Down on the ground beneath these windows was a little group of men staring stupidly at a short, thick ladder which just reached the window-sill of the first story above. Its one great feature was not at first sight apparent. When Courtenay saw it he cried out in despair, but Stagmar nodded with high satisfaction as he immediately approached it. Robert sprang after him. "Herbert!" he cried, grasping the strong arm vehemently. "I'm going up on that thing first. I've no life worth saving. You have. I shall go. I have the right. What is a child of Helen Howard to a man like you?"

Herbert Stagmar, looking white and haggard in the weird light, whispered to him sadly: "I have the right, Bob. A greater one than you. Helen Howard is my lawful wife." Then, as Courtenay stood staring at him, petrified, the writer placed his foot upon the first round of the ladder.

The feat which Herbert Stagmar now performed was accomplished by actual count in something less than ten minutes. If it would seem in the telling to be treble that length, it is only because the emotions of human beings are capable of enormous increase in rapidity of vibration when strong excitement and repression is brought to bear on them.

A rumor whose words held something of awe had circulated among the crowd that an attempt was to be made by some one to rescue the life of a person still in the building. According to the universal law

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of curiosity, then, there was a general move to the side of the structure where stood Herbert Stagmar and the little group of men about the ladder. Arrived there, there was a furious struggle for the best positions, for they found that their spectacle had already begun. A man stood upon the projecting sill of one of the first story windows, directly underneath the lighted one far above which he wanted to reach. His ladder was one story tall, and the second sill rose perpendicularly above his head, and none could perceive that in the two top shafts of the old fire ladder were imbedded two stout hooks of iron. The crowd held its breath. What was he going to do?

Covering their eyes with their hands and then peering nervously through their fingers, people watched him, as, balancing gingerly on the ledge, he lifted his instrument high from the lofty perch and crashed it suddenly through the glass in the window above. The hooks caught in the inner sill and held. The scaling ladder worked well. The lower end of it hung unsupported before him, and once more the madman began, rapidly, carefully, easily, to ascend. It was a miracle, incredible to all but those who saw it.

Upon the outer edge of the crowd stood Courtenay with Helen. Robert held the woman, who was nearly beside herself. Neither of them could watch. At the first moment Courtenay's heart had turned sick. It was useless to imagine that Stagmar would come back to them except in death. Robert himself was ready to make a second and even more desperate trial if necessary, but this sight he could not watch. The language of faint groans and sighs by which a

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multitude interprets strong feeling, and the fearful breathlessness between each faint noise is perfectly intelligible to the human heart of any nationality. Thus La Caralita, from second to second, knew that her husband still lived, that he was progressing on that fearful way. And all the while she could not see him, and dared not look at the window above.

And Stagmar himself? Stagmar was unconscious of his position, utterly reckless of himself. The murmurs of the people below came faintly to his ears, but he did not try to think what they meant. His eyes noted one by one the rounds of the ladder which his feet were pressing. His breath came steadily. His pulse was slow. His body was dripping and cold with sweat, but that he did not know.

He felt only that the blistering heat from the rocking building was scorching the wood of his ladder, but the desperation of his situation did not appal him. A second consciousness held for him the knowledge that a soul was waiting for him above—of the one praying for him below he thought not at all. Again he stood upon a sill, and again the ladder with its providential appendages was unhesitatingly flung up into the next window above. Once more it caught, and his powerful body swung up and up through space. He was half way to the next stopping place when a sudden sound smote his ears. He never knew afterward that this noise was perceptible to him minutes before it reached the ears of any one else. It was the clang of fire-bells. The delayed engines were coming at last. A sudden fear thrilled into his heart, the terror of realization. He caught

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his breath. For the instant he had come near to relaxing his hold. A second more and he was safe again, going on swiftly, steadily. Next a low chorus of words reached him from below. He thought them only a general relief at sound of the bells, but he was wrong. In the fourth-story window, with its lights, the people were watching a little pale, dark-eyed face pressed close against the pane. The white of his night-clothes showed in weird contrast to the black of his tumbled hair. It was Philip, the child.

Now, for the first time, Helen Howard looked up. She shuddered, but continued to watch, fascinated. Stagmar stood upon the third sill. Reluctantly the crowd was making way for the engines. Courtenay had left her side and was with the fire marshal. This was the sight she saw:

Upon the white stone ledge in the air stood her god, lifting the black ladder in both arms. Below, from every window he had left, poured black, gusty spirals of smoke. High over his head, across the roof, a madly merry flame leaped over toward the window which framed the figure of the child. The whirring roar of the now mighty fire was deafening. The shadow of eternity seemed to be cutting the woman off from the sight of husband and child.

For the last time short ladder was lifted. With an unheard cry the boy started back as the black things flew in upon him and caught in the window-sash. Bits of glass spattered about; one or two of them cutting the delicate hands. But paralyzed by his loneliness and the instinctive knowledge of his danger, Philip stood there quietly until a dark head

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appeared without the window, and finally the shoulders, arms, and body of the man who presently swung into the room beside him. From the crowd came one sharp shout of praise; then silence again, save for the increasing noise of the bursting flames about the two—Herbert Stagmar and Snippington's child.

"Climb to my back and hold there tight—so. Now keep your eyes shut if you can, and if you don't do that, then look up. Understand?" he muttered expressionlessly, and the man-child nodded, as he placed his thin arms about his rescuer's neck. Philip was a light burden, and Stagmar breathed a little with relief as he turned again hurriedly to the window.

Just outside came the top rounds of a mighty jointed ladder which was being swung through the air from below, while a hundred hands pointed eagerly at the window toward which it had been directed. Stagmar waited patiently until his staircase of safety rested lightly on the sill beside him. He gave one swift look down through the hot, smoky air, one back at the room which seemed to be already shriveling with flames, and a third into the pallid face of the child. Then carefully he climbed out and began his downward journey.

It was to him infinitely more terrible than the ascent. Then his position had been such that his senses had refused to realize it. He had worked like a stupid man. Now the overtaxed nerves asserted themselves, and each downward step had become a fear. Flames seemed now to be leaping from every window, even that which held his ladder, and upon which a heavy stream of water played. Hot perspira-

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tion rolled from his face and arms as he calculated the possibility of the frame above giving away. And those below who had watched the fearless ascent marveled as they saw the shadowy black figure crawling downward toward them, stop every now and then, and seem to tremble as it proceeded. Through the flickering sheets of fire that waved above the roof Stagmar could see a little group of firemen who wielded axe and hose for him from there. Further effort was useless. Nothing now could save the building. The engines had come too late for that.

Suddenly with a leap of terror at his heart Stagmar felt the arms about his neck loosen their brave hold. Instantly he threw himself flat along the ladder and caught the two tiny hands in his own cold ones. "What is it, Phil? Afraid, little chap?"

There was no answer. With a low exclamation he worked the child around from his back with painful difficulty, and held the little fainting figure over one shoulder. Then hurriedly the descent was renewed. There was no time to be lost. The walls were rocking violently in the hot wind. Now there were but twenty rounds left for his bruised feet to press. Philip had become inexpressibly heavy. The crowd below saw the strong figure waver, and prepared to catch him should he fall. How long the descent had been! Almost twice the length of time which that wonderful ascent had occupied. Two eternal seconds more and the ground, God's earth, lay under Herbert Stagmar's feet. Some one took from him the child. But some one was not Helen Howard. She was beside her hero, tears from her eyes raining down upon his

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hand, which she grasped. He was surrounded by men and women of the streets—all of them with souls, good people, eager to clasp his right hand in pride of brotherhood. Then, as he looked about on friendly faces beaming with their admiration, and heard the voices shaking, for those who had seen his deed could not speak easily now, he quietly fainted.

Immediately he was carried from the throng and laid down upon a pile of coats. Whisky was put to his lips, hands fought for the privilege of chafing his. He was not long allowed the blessing of unconsciousness. When his eyes opened again Courtenay stood beside him with the child. "There is a carriage here, Bert, if you can reach it now."

And the people were astounded to hear this man in evening dress, top hat, and light coat calling the roughly-clad hero by a given name. Some of them would have liked to resent it, but stared a little, and then smiled as the writer said, faintly:

"All right now, Bob, I guess; though I don't know quite what I'm about yet. Good deal of a strain, you know."

They were about to start toward the vehicle when Stagmar was addressed by the fire marshal, who had just come up and laid his hand upon the writer's shoulder.

"My man," he said, "if you want to go into the service under me, you shall have a good position, and I'll vouch for it that your examination will not be severe. You'd work your way up in no time."

"Thank you very much," responded Stagmar, smiling, "but I have no desire whatsoever to enter

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the service. It would be utterly impossible for me to do again what I have done to-night."

"Well, you'd probably never have another chance at anything so tough. Just give me your name, anyhow, and if ever you like to come in you'll be taken, I'm pretty sure."

"Thank you," repeated Stagmar, "but really I shall not care to enter the force."

As he passed on, however, Courtenay, who followed him, leaned over toward the fireman confidentially. "He might have given his name," he said. "Since he didn't, I will, for him." And to the marshal's "If you please, sir," replied, "Perhaps you may have heard of him. He is, I believe, quite widely known as Herbert Stagmar." And Courtenay went on, chuckling in great glee with himself as the marshal dropped back in embarrassment.

The four, Courtenay, Stagmar, Helen and the child, stood beside the carriage that Robert had found—heaven knows where.

"Is there room for us all, Bob?"

"I don't know—I guess not. How do you want to be fixed?" asked Courtenay, awkwardly, thinking of the revelation that had been made to him that night.

"Helen will go with me, and—"

"I!" interrupted La Caralita, with a little cry. "Certainly not, Mr. Stagmar. It will be perfectly easy for me to reach some place where I can pass the night with Philip. I know many people about here."

"Do not try to shield me before Robert, Helen. He is aware of our relationship. Of course, until the

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time comes he will say nothing about it. But Philip? I suppose he comes with us?"

"I beg your pardon," said Courtenay, hastily, "if you will permit it, I should like to keep the child with me for a day or two. After that we shall see. I'll get him home now. It's nearly morning."

This was true. As the creaky hack drove slowly away from the scene of the fire with Herbert Stagmar and his wife, a dim streak of the dawn lighted up the still fiery pile of ruins beneath which lay forever buried the wayward life of a wayward woman. Joan Howard Stagmar, tossing restlessly in her sleep within her father's house, heard in a dim consciousness the opening of the door which was to let in upon her life a great change, a deep trouble, and a new joy—one greater than all else.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE DISGRACE OF ONE.

A strong feeling of sympathy and intimate understanding for the Stagmars had suddenly sprung up in the heart of Robert Courtenay. The events of that night of fire had deepened his admiration of the character of the woman, and had excited in him a respect for the writer which he had perhaps never felt for any other person, save perhaps only his mother, who had come from so old and fine a New York family that she had never been able to wear black stockings. Now on that early dawn, before he retired, worn out with the startling events of the night, and after having consigned the boy Philip to the astonished mercies of the dubious Williams, he had not been able to realize the fact that henceforth Herbert Stagmar was to be regarded as a family man, his wife (horrible!) being La Caralita, of the Moulin Rouge, La Scala, and Koster & Bial's! But by the time he had slept over the knowledge, and lay staring up at the ceiling with his sleepy eyes at noon next day, it was not so very astounding after all. Anything in the way of a scandal had never been known to remain a nine-days' gossiping point for the redoubtable Courtenay; still, a scandal in connection with Stagmar, the exemplary, was a novelty fresh as Darlington butter.

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"Tight place for him, on my word," pondered Robert, tumbling his drawer into a pile of chaff in search of the right shaped collar button. "How in the deuce d'he ever come to marry her? That's the wonder. How long ago was it, and how could he keep so mum about it all? Was it long a—Williams! where have you put the brushes?—Must have been a dog's age. Oh, most probably. There's Joan. Certain now whose daughter she is.—Not so hard, for heaven's sake! My head isn't patent-leather.—Stagmar's, I'd wager anything. Else where did her eyes come from? How's the young one this morning, Williams?"

"He's up, sir."

"Sleep well?"

"Yes, sir; not a sound after I'd put him in."

"Dare say he'd like something to eat, wouldn't he? Does he eat, do you fancy, or just take what-do-you-call-it—Mellin's Food out of a bottle?"

"He seems to have teeth, sir. He bit a string in two this morning—one that got knotted in his clothes."

"That so? Guess he could manage a chop, then."

Chops and coffee for two were ordered, and Courtenay somewhat nervously took his place at the head of that little table which was familiar to so many Coralies and Clairettes. Here he proceeded to cut the meat into microscopic bits, still under the impression that the tiny mouth opposite would have difficulty in masticating anything so solid as a chop. Philip seemed interested in the meal, although he did not eat very heartily. Robert, however, was pleased with his table manners, and wished him to talk.

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To Courtenay's satisfaction he spoke suddenly, pointing to a photograph which hung near him on the wall, "Do you know Mr. Stagmar?"

"Oh, yes; very well. Do you?"

"Yes, I do. I'd like to see him."

"You did see him last night. He took you out of the window when the house burned. Didn't you know that?"

The child shook his head thoughtfully.

"Is Mr. Stagmar your daddy, Philip?"

"What's that?"

"Your papa—father, you know.

"Oh, no. He's not my father."

"Who is, then?"

"May I tell? My mother said for me not to tell unless somebody was going to help me."

"Well, you will want me to help you. Tell me about him."

The child regarded him seriously for a moment or two, and then said, slowly, and with great care as to pronunciation, "My father is the Reverend Titus Emollitus Snippington, of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church of Chicago."

"Who taught you that?"

"My mother."

"Will you say it for me to a large, old gentleman that I am going to take you to see this morning?"

Philip did not answer. He had finished eating and was tired of being questioned. Getting down from his chair he went over and stood by the photograph of Stagmar, his napkin hanging from his neck, his tiny hands clasped unconsciously before him. "Mr. Stag-

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mar took me driving sometimes in a big, beautiful carriage," he observed, without guile, contemplatively.

"Did he?" asked Courtenay, interested at once in this revelation. "Did he go with you himself?"

"Only once."

Courtenay did not want any more rolls, and there was nothing at all in the Tribune this morning. He rose and strolled over to the window. "Well, Philip, I'm going to take you driving in a 'big, beautiful carriage' myself this morning, or rather this afternoon. We shall drive for a bit, and then we must stop to see the large old gentleman I spoke of a minute ago. You must be a good boy, and answer him if he asks you any questions. Will you?"

"Yes, if we drive first," answered Philip, with a view to business. Courtenay nodded in reply to him, and then stopped suddenly and began to examine the child critically.

"What's the trouble with your clothes, chicken? Seems to me they're a bit queer."

Philip looked up anxiously. "They aren't mine," he said, with a little quiver in his voice that suggested apprehension of ridicule.

"No, they don't seem to fit exactly. Who got 'em for you?"

The child pointed mysteriously toward the bed-room beyond. "The man in there," he said, in a whisper.

"Williams!"

"Yes, Mr. Courtenay." Williams appeared at the door covered with confusion and blacking. In his left hand he held a boot.

"Where did you get these things for the child?"

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"Well, you see, sir, begging your pardon, when you brought him in this morning he hadn't nothing on but his night garments; seeing which I made bold to borrow these things from the linen lady in the house, with who I'm acquainted, as it happens. She has a boy of her own, sir, something this size."

"I see. Well, take some money and go uptown now immediately, and get him some clothes, and hat, and coat, and gloves, and things, and then return these to the linen lady with thanks and—a—perhaps a little remuneration for her courtesy. Understand?"

Williams did understand, and having successfully removed the blacking, started out with some nervousness upon his shopping expedition. Fortunately this invaluable valet had a very good eye for size, and assisted also by Fate, the things which he brought back were as nearly a fit for the childish figure as one could have wished. Philip looked very nicely when at length, somewhat late in the afternoon, he sallied forth clinging to Courtenay's hand. But there was tribulation in his small heart, for never before had he been so worked and disputed over. In the end it had been only with the aid of the merciful linen lady, who kindly refrained from expressing her exact opinion of Courtenay, that he was untied, unbuttoned, and unhooked, as it were, and put correctly together.

The drive, however, proved a balm to Philip's aching spirit, for the victoria was as big and beautiful as he could have wished, and Mr. Courtenay's hat shone like a lofty silk sun. It was something after five when the two alighted at the imposing residence of the Episcopal bishop, and found his reverence at

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home. And Robert was in the most excellent of humors as he seated himself comfortably to await Titus Emollitus Snippington's chief. Philip was beside him on a high chair, neither knowing nor caring what they were doing here, swinging his feet contentedly and rejoicing in the brightness of his small shoes.

The "large gentleman" did not keep them waiting long. He was a prompt man, and besides that Mr. Courtenay's card was of considerable importance. He entered the room where they sat with a magisterial air, but greeted both his visitors cordially. To the long conversation which followed Philip did not pay much attention. He was more interested in listening to a parrot which in some part of the house was repeating the Lord's prayer with great fervor. He was very sorry when the bishop rose with annoyance and an apology to shut the door. But presently a photograph which Philip recognized was brought out. Courtenay and the other discussed it for a little in low voices, while Philip examined the birds which were carved upon the mantel. And then the large gentleman turned suddenly to him and asked in a pleasant voice, "My boy, do you know this person?" showing the photograph.

"Yes," answered Philip, with a little hesitation.

"Tell him who it is," said Courtenay, curtly; and for the second time came the boy's answer, slowly and carefully given:

"That is my father, the Reverend Titus Emollitus Snippington, of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, of Chicago."

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Bishop Cleering looked at the child and sighed perplexedly.

"I am afraid, Mr. Courtenay, that there is not much room for doubt, but still I wish that I might talk with—the woman."

"I am extremely sorry, bishop. That would be impossible. Unfortunately the woman is a lady."

"I must have an interview with him to-night. You have done all that is necessary, but the boy I wish you to leave with me, for the present. I will provide for him in some way afterward. It is all very sad, and very difficult also. However, it must be gone through with. It rarely happens, thank God! Good day, Mr. Courtenay."

So Philip missed his homeward drive, and remained with Bishop Cleering, comforted only by the thought of the parrot.

Meantime Courtenay, having returned to his rooms at the club, burst in upon Williams vigorously. "I want some foolscap, Williams. There's none here. Bring some up from the writing-room, and plenty of it, Williams, and I'm out to everybody."

Williams, the imperturbable, disappeared, wondering what lady Mr. Courtenay chose to address upon foolscap instead of his own note paper. Meantime Robert sat at his desk smiling to himself in very good spirits, counting off something on his fingers. When Williams returned with the desired article Courtenay looked up at him mischievously. "I've got to earn some money, Williams. I am about to become a literary hack and scandal-monger."

"Yes, sir," answered Williams, absently; then sud-

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denly breaking out with, "I beg pardon, sir, but—is Master Philip to be got ready for dinner to-night?"

"No, my good man. Your trials are over. Philip has been dropped at the wayside; in other words, at the house of the bishop."

Williams mustered sufficient dignity to cover his joy, and hastily departed to the linen lady for congratulations.

Meantime, while the boy was rapturously occupied with the devout parrot, Courtenay was toiling laboriously through an article which he purposed sending to the Tribune, with a personal letter to the editor, whom he knew. This present business should be done thoroughly or not at all. The discomfiture of Snippington was a thing to be rejoiced over, and, whether or no, his half-made promise to Helen Howard—she was not yet to be called Helen Stagmar—should be fulfilled to the letter. The article which Robert prepared upon the subject was as racy as he dared make it, dwelt much upon "the lady" without giving an idea of whom she was, and would altogether, its author flattered himself, make singularly enjoyable reading to any one who had known the fervent worship which had been bestowed upon the exposed man.

Meantime the falling idol was keeping to his rooms during the day. The memory of the scene of the night before was not so very troublesome when once he had slept over it, and still Titus was not altogether at his ease. He had for some time been aware that his "foible" was known by several men, and having grown accustomed to this knowledge, it no longer

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appeared menacing to him. He felt the scene of the night before to have been entirely the fault of the dancer, and he was in consequence violently angry with her. But as for his ruin being brought about by either of the two men, Snippington did not believe in that. He did not know the extent to which some men can hate a cad. Here, as ever, the small divine's vanity rode over his judgment. Still, during the whole morning he was ill at ease, and did nothing but restlessly toss a novel about, as though balancing with it the fate of his reputation. It was not till afternoon that he felt able to concentrate his mind upon a delayed sermon.

About an hour before dinner he was interrupted by a note, a pleasant little epistle from the bishop.

He was requested to call that evening upon a small matter of business. The request was courteous in the extreme, nevertheless Snippington's lips dried suddenly as he read it. At best, it was a coincidence. However, there was no use in shirking the call. And it might be merely about confirmation classes—relieving thought! At any rate, whatever Titus Emolitus of St. Matthew's feared, hoped, or fancied, he stood at the door of the bishop's residence at eight o'clock that evening.

He was shown at once into the bishop's study, a small room, done in oak, and surrounded with bookshelves. The small stand in the corner was piled with calf-bound tomes, and upon the desk was a litter of papers that portended a Sunday sermon. Snippington had not to wait. True, the bishop was in the midst of dinner, but that small fact made no differ-

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ence. The greeting of his reverence was cold, so Snip thought, twisting a little.

"Good evening. I am glad to see that you are prompt. This little matter will not take a moment. You may come in, child. Snippington, is this your son?"

Philip, as he had been instructed, entered the room, and stood quietly before his father.

If Bishop Cleering had at all doubted Mr. Courtenay's necessarily disinterested statement, that doubt was now removed. Snippington had half risen, and was glaring about him like a wounded beast. His face was gray as ashes. His breath came in gasps from his open mouth. He sank back into a chair without a word. The child drew back a little at sight of him.

"Philip, go to Mrs. Cleering, and have your wraps put on," said the bishop, with something like pity in his voice.

When the child came back a few decisive words had settled forever the fate of the dearly beloved Titus. He was no longer reverend. The city was not his place. His downfall had come before that of the man he hated. He took his child by the little, warm hand and dragged him away into the night. A few hours later he, with the unhappy Philip, was gone. Chicago saw him no more.

Courtenay's article in the Tribune next morning was an astonishing success, although it must be confessed that myriad were the inquiries as to the "lady" in the case—concerning whom no one was ever the wiser—and that numerous feminine minds were tem-

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porarily embittered toward religion after the exposure of the sympathetic rector of St. Matthew's

So ended the brief, brilliant career of Titus E. Jones, alias Snippington, whose downfall had only come through a too ardent espousal of the pleasanter points of modern realism.

CHAPTER XXV.

MRS. HERBERT STAGMAR.

Late on the morning after the apartment fire, Herbert Stagmar left his room, only to shut himself within his study. Carson informed him that Joan had been up for some time, and that he believed she had gone out. The butler knew that his master had come in at half-past four that morning, but of the presence of Helen in the house he was totally unaware. When they reached his home Stagmar had shown her into a great bedchamber, such a one as she had not seen before, and there he left her. After she had mustered courage to lie down upon the bed, she sank at once into a heavy slumber from which she did not awaken until noon that day. When she opened her eyes her first thought was to reach her husband unseen by any one else in the house, and then rely upon his morning judgment to—send her away from him. For to her this seemed the only thing to be done.

Very cautiously she made her way along the wide hall, finally reaching the head of the stairs. She was still dressed in the white embroidered dancer's costume in which Courtenay had carried her from the burning building. Now, in the pitiless light of the noonday sun, the broad streaks of dirt and wet upon

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the worn satin were relentlessly exposed. The tulle skirts underneath hung about her feet in shredded fringes; and her face, rising above the strage dress, looked unwontedly old, and sallow, and worn, and streaked, as it still was, with disordered rouge. The one beautiful thing about her was the magnificent crown of tangled red hair, here and there traced with a thread of white.

Slowly the dancer descended the stairs, hesitating at each landing, glancing about her into each gloomy corner, fearful of discovery, everywhere hoping to encounter her husband. She had reached the last step, and then stood still, wondering which way to turn, when suddenly some one stepped out of a doorway on her right and came rapidly toward her. Despite the half-darkness of the hall where she stood, Helen recognized her daughter instantly. She was going upstairs. With a sudden exclamation, Joan stopped short as she perceived the figure before her, whom she did not recognize.

"Who are you? How did you get in here?" she asked, in a startled voice.

Helen winced. "I wish to see Mr. Stagmar," she said, gently.

"Mr. Stagmar?" asked the girl, with widely open eyes. "He is in his study, I believe."

She did not go on, but continued to gaze in wondering surprise at the dancer, whose presence she could not find a reason for.

"His study? I do not know where that is. Will you please tell me?" Helen was a little imperious now. She could not endure the reluctance of her daughter.

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Without a word Joan Howard turned about and led the way down the hall toward the great room wherein sat Stagmar, waiting and nerving himself to the task before him. The door was flung open suddenly, and in the doorway stood the figure of his daughter, with some one behind her—Stagmar well knew whom. He was rather relieved at this arrangement of affairs.

"There is some one to see you," said the supercilious voice of the girl.

Stagmar rose at once. "Ah, yes. Come in, Joan; you had best be here also. That is right. Kindly close the door."

"Surely, Herbert, you are making a mistake," said Helen, after a little pause, while the writer was gathering breath. "Let me go at once."

"Mistakes of that sort I have done with, Helen. You are my wife; I owe you protection, just as much as to our daughter. Ours has been a strange marriage. We must become reacquainted now."

"Ah! Father!" said Joan, sharply, sinking helplessly into a chair, her eyes fixed upon the woman whom she recognized at last. Her father turned sternly toward her, but Helen Stagmar spoke again, softly.

"It is not best, Herbert, believe me. Let me go again. No one need ever know."

The writer looked earnestly at her with heavy eyes: "No, Helen, you have come back to me now for always. We three are of the same blood. We remain together."

"Of the same blood—perhaps. Not of the same stock. You are—a—gentleman."

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"I am of the people. More than that—I had no father, you know."

"It is hard. Very hard for—Joan. How can she forgive me?"

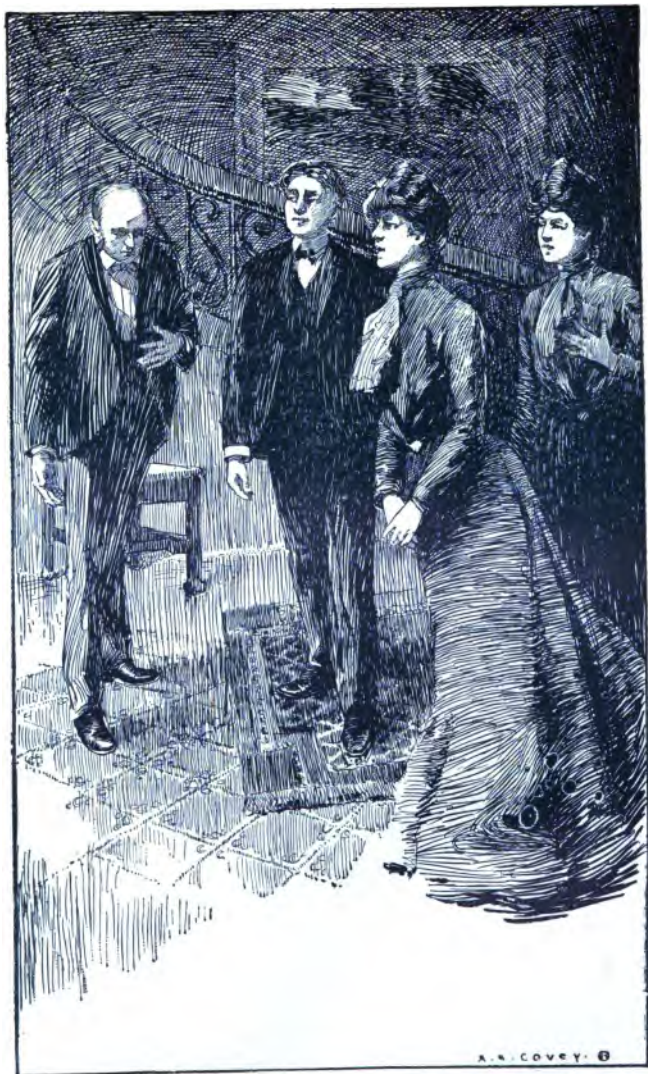
The girl rose hesitatingly here. "Yes, it is hard; I confess that. Nevertheless, I must abide by my father's decision. It is my duty." It was an ungracious speech, but not ungraciously spoken. At the end of it Joan held out both her hands. So, with but little emotion on the part of any of the three, the matter of a destiny was finally decided.

Half an hour later luncheon was announced. Mrs. Stagmar, dressed in a dark cloth costume of her daughter's which fitted her emaciated form not badly, followed the other two into the lofty dining-room with drooping head. Somehow this matter was singularly unpleasant. It seemed unsuitable.

The table was arranged for three. Carson had been told of a "guest." As they entered the room Stagmar turned to the butler.

"Carson," he remarked, in a matter-of-fact tone, "I shall henceforth be very glad to resign my post as housekeeper to this lady—my wife, Mrs. Stagmar, your mistress.

For the first time in his long service as a butler Carson was startled out of his imperturbability. He looked closely at the tall lady, who smiled and murmured something very timidly. With some anger Stagmar saw the eyes of the man move from Mrs. Stagmar to Joan, and then back again. Joan also perceived it, and flushed. A moment later Carson had straightened, and then was bowing obsequiously;



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but the servant was master of the meal, and the three knew it. They could not force themselves to speak. Ah! How the old world makes us pay for righting a wrong!

It was an endless and a forlorn afternoon, one always painfully remembered by the three. Stagmar wrote, or rather tried his best to keep up a pretense of writing. Near him sat his stranger wife, idly. She looked with a disagreeable sense of novelty at the somber magnificence about her, feeling no desire either to speak or move, but only wishing that she might stop thinking for a time. She wondered a little over the baleful glance from the pale eyes of the yellow-haired Magdalene above her husband's desk. Did he see it as she did, she asked of herself. If so, how could he have it always hanging there above him? Now and again Stagmar looked over at her, trying to smile, but failing to awaken any gleam of pleasure in his eyes. He wrote badly. His story became grotesque, his motives distorted, his people unnatural, his situations impossible.

Joan Howard remained by herself in her own room, a novel in her hand. But she could not read. What interest was there in all those foolish people whose stories would surely end in happiness, the real toil of their existence hidden behind that beautifying veil which a writer always has power to throw over the ugly incidents of his puppet's lives. Joan's own story held out no promises of a brilliant future now. The weight of her mother's history lay heavy on her breast. She went over many things that had happened to her during this one eventful winter. The

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thought of Malcolm came to her, and with it a generous gladness that he had escaped from the life that must be hers to the sweet, cold, perfect atmosphere of that other woman—a rival no longer. As her father had done, Joan painfully acknowledged to herself what the presence of Helen in their lives henceforth must mean—social ostracism, absolute and complete. A life of hopeless, forbidding loneliness lay before them all. And would not Helen be the first to feel it?

Even in the midst of her frivolity Joan had learned many things during those months through which she had been fêted and courted. She knew well the characteristics of that society which was about her, and to which she was devoted. She knew how pitiless were those iron-bound laws writ in the book of conventionality. And she was able calmly to contemplate their certain application to her household, since the suddenness of the recent events had left her rather numb, nervously. She could understand, but she did not feel. Mother Nature is good to us. She never gives more than one great burden at a time, and when the big ones come all the little ones suddenly disappear.

As for Stagmar, why was it that he was so much less troubled over this thing than was his daughter? Ah! Because he was now rid of his load. The burden of an existence built upon a foundation of secrecy and dread had fallen from him. He had become himself. Nothing would ever again be so difficult. But change comes ever hardly to a human mind. So Stagmar found it more disturbing than he had imagined it could be to have continually near him this

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shrinking, sad-eyed woman, once his fiery-hearted wife. She was now like none of the women he knew. He had become accustomed to those who live continuously before the world, who sweep through life with a grand mien, over the feelings of others, with their heads high and their heavy skirts a-trail, and their voices smilingly monotonous.

Helen's spirit was utterly gone. She was out of place, and she knew it. But in her present position she was not even mistress of herself. Her graciousness and her tact availed her nothing. She was afraid of the very servants. She did not understand the life that her husband and her daughter had lived; therefore she did not desire it. They had chosen for her her course, and she could do nothing but leave it all to them. She was glad to think that she need no longer fear the end—her natural end, of shame, poverty, possibly starvation. This seemed to her the only pleasant thing in her strange situation.

Upon the following morning the Stagmars, with the rest of a world not their own, read the full account of the fall of Snippington. Two columns it occupied, for the city editor, rejoicing over a complete "scoop," had refused to cut a word of Courtenay's glaring tale. Stagmar perused it with some little satisfaction. Helen glanced through the cynical lines with a mighty relief at her heart, and Joan, one of Titus' followers, learned of it with regretful astonishment, being unaware, like the rest of her kind, of the identity of the woman. Her first impulse was an idea of dropping in at Mrs. Kent's for a few moments that afternoon at tea-time, to raise shocked eyebrows,

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and delicately peck a few hitherto unsuspected sins of the *ci-devant* rector's into sight from beneath his now tattered garment of holiness. But alas! Mrs. Kent's drawing-room was awful to her now. Already it seemed to be a thing of the past. Although nothing was yet known, the thought came to her shudderingly that their names—hers and her father's—soon would figure in headlines as conspicuous as those from which Snippington's stared in capitals.

But if Joan had the heart to go nowhere, one person, and that the only one who knew the whole story of the Stagmars, came to them. Courtenay's reputation for daring and for risky ventures was already so great that one more affair, and that only a visit to a family over whom was suspended the social sword of Damocles, would make no difference in the number of his desirable invitations. He saw all three of them. A position toward Helen which should have been somewhat strained, with Stagmar knowing all that he did, was rendered easy and almost pleasant by the fact that on that night of fire Courtenay had been as ready to face Eternity for her as had the writer, and indeed in the matter of Helen's own escape had done as much as the other for the child. Somehow that night had put the three upon a footing of equality and friendship, which the presence of Joan did not dissipate. It was through Courtenay's own recklessly Bohemian nature perhaps that this was possible. But the girl, mindful of her last encounter with this man, held herself far aloof from his smiling, questioning eyes, and barely spoke during his long call.

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The conversation ran only upon impersonal topics, yet even this cleared and refreshed the heavy air of the household. Carson himself condescended to appear less sullenly when he saw the pleasant grace with which the new Mrs. Stagmar received their visitor of the highest circles. And now for the first time Helen looked about her new abode with something of pleasure. To Courtenay, her erratic follower, she could talk with more ease than to Stagmar himself. Robert knew her and understood her perfectly. She was in sympathy with him, he with her. When he had apparently ended his call, and had risen, after bidding the ladies farewell, Stagmar grasped him by the arm, and with a significant glance drew him away into his study. Courtenay made no protest. He seated himself in a comfortable chair and looked up at his companion with a kind of expectancy. Stagmar did not speak at once, but stood with one elbow upon the low mantel, his head on his hand.

"You've made a strong bluff, Herbert," said Courtenay at last, "but it's bound to be a mistake. You can't get it accepted here, Bert. She's too well known, I'm sorry to say."

"My dear boy, I didn't do this thing with any hope of 'bluffing' anybody. Upon my part it has been a long piece of cowardice, leaving her so alone, and I know how long and how hard the rectifying of it all will be." Stagmar's tone was calmly sad.

"In heaven's name, Herbert, how did you come to do it in the first place?"

"We were married years and years ago. Long before I came to be known, when I was only a year

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or so past my majority. There is no ancestry in me, you know, Courtenay. We are both of the people."

"Up to this time you have been a marvel. If you had kept together in the beginning you would have been here together now."

Stagmar shook his head. "No, Bob. She was not of that sort. She had to have her way. She would have died or killed me, I think, if I hadn't let her go. In her way she was a genius, too."

"Then why couldn't she have gone back to the stage again? Didn't she want to?"

"She said so. She has done her best to turn me from my decision, for my own sake, of late. I cannot understand the way in which women's points of view change. Can you? She used to hate me with all her heart before we separated, I believe. Since then, and particularly since the night she was hurt, she has saved me from scandal more than once. It was on the evening of the fire, just before all of you arrived, that she told me she was going back to the stage. There was no time for us to talk just then. I went out and walked about and thought. The life she was leading turned me sick. I've never gone in for that sort of thing, you know, Bob. I can't comprehend the instinct that leads to it. And I began to realize that I owed her something. She is my lawful wife, and she was in need of protection, I saw very plainly. More than once before she had scouted protection, but that was long ago. I had seen the look in her eyes, and I knew that she might refuse me in words, but that if I took her from it all simply by quiet force, she would be grateful at heart. So I've brought her

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home. From a worldly point of view it is idiocy, doubtedless, but from my outlook it was all that was left to do. She is my equal, you know. And now—" Stagmar hesitated a little.

"Well, *now* what?" asked Courtenay, watching the other closely and with strong interest in his face.

"Well, just now I've got to find out—how soon we are all to be cast aside. The three of us go to the opera to-night. It is to be 'Tannhauser,' and there will probably be a dual performance. Second cast, Tannhauser, Herbert Stagmar; Venus, Helen Howard; Walter, Mr. Robert Courtenay—you'll be Walter, eh, Bob? The Landgraf—perhaps Jim Kent; Wolfram, Malcolm; other knights and ladies, different members of society. How does it go, eh?"

"The Elizabeth—you have forgotten the most important character."

"The Elizabeth! Don't—Bob—oh pshaw! It was nothing but a joke. The—the opera wouldn't go, of course—without—the—Elizabeth." Stagmar had turned sharply away. Courtenay looked after him in astonishment. What was the matter? Was there some one—else? Robert dared not show his curiosity. As Stagmar seemed to have recovered his composure, the other said, looking at him dubiously:

"Well, taking the bull by the horns is the bravest method. It is barely possible that their feast off Snippington has satisfied gossiping society for the moment. But—"

"'But,' my dear Bob, you know, as well as I do, that it is always ready for a little more dessert." And Stagmar sighed.

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"Is there anything that I can do before to-night, Herbert?"

"Thank you, nothing more. I wanted your opinion of the matter merely. It quite coincides with my own."

"Well, then—I must be off. Until to-night—"

"You mean to be in at the death?" asked the other, taking the offered hand smilingly.

"At your biggest triumph, I trust," said Courtenay, with pitiful gallantry, and was gone.

Joan Howard was thoroughly dismayed when she was informed of the projected appearance of the opera performance. There was, however, nothing to be done but conform to her father's plan. Before she dressed that evening she gave herself a few moments of solitude in her own dark room, gathering strength at best she might for an ordeal which would have shattered all the self-possession of most women. But now that this thing must be done, Joan Howard was not one to wear a heart upon her sleeve. So for her mother she laid out the most beautiful and the newest evening gown that her wardrobe held—one which she herself had never worn; and her own costume of Nile green satin was marvelously becoming.

Stagmar, immaculate in his evening dress, contemplated his ladies with some curiosity as they descended the stairs, his wife a little in advance of Joan. They both looked very young, Helen a trifle conscious and uneasy, his daughter superbly haughty and even superciliously overbearing. Both were beautiful. His hands were steady and his heart like lead as he wrapped each in her delicate cloak. Car-

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son, bowing, opened the door, and they passed out to the liveried carriage.

The first act was nearly over, and the house filled to overflowing when the small party entered their box. Instantly all three were aware that half a hundred opera-glasses had been leveled at them. Joan painfully imagined the remarks and comparisons which were being made between her and Helen, who sat leaning carelessly back, now and then using her fan. Her attitude, at least, was perfect. It was true that they were causing a little sensation, but everything is not known all at once.

"Who is she?"

"Possibly some relative, though she isn't a particle like him."

"Perhaps an aunt or something of Miss Howard's."

"More likely to be it. They are alike certainly."

And indeed before the intermission was well begun, so catching is an idea, half the house was speculating over Stagmar's new sister-in-law, and the other half—the half in dark coats and trousers, was looking a trifle conscious, and studiously examining its program. Although these men knew no more than their wives and sisters of Herbert Stagmar's relations with La Caralita, they at least were all of them sufficiently well aware of that lady's eventful history to be glad that a visit to the box in which she sat was not a necessity. Two small cigarette men, who had come without ladies, sat nodding to each other over their collar-tops.

"By the Lord, Jack! did ye ever see such a bit of nerve, eh?"

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"Most prob'ly she's got the—what you call it?—drop on Bertie, don't you know?"

"How's that? Some hold on him, eh? Case of blackmail, you don't think?"

"N—no. Scarcely,—with him. Dev'lish queer, eh, now?"

"Yaas—dev'lish. Ha-h—oh, say! Look there, now!"

"By Jove! Jim Kent and Courtenay, as we live! Oh, really!"

"Bob'll do most anything. But Jimmy! I should ne—"

"Look now! Stagmar's presenting them."

This was true. Jim Kent, with a face deathly pale, but a manner that spoke his determination, had entered the box, and after greeting the writer and bowing to Joan, stood in an attitude of attentive expectancy for Herbert to make the introduction. Before this was done, Helen turned. She also was very pale, and if Kent had but known it the low sweetness of her voice was ominous.

"Good evening, Jim. It seems a long time since we have met. Come! Sit down and tell me of yourself."

Her salutation had been all too palpably toward an old friend. It would be difficult to hide this now. Stagmar bit his lips in anger, but he understood, as Kent did not, that it was not stupidity upon the part of his wife. It was like Helen to show herself hurt in this way. And in a measure she was justified in anger. If they were all ashamed to recognize her, why had they brought her here, why had the doc-

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ior come to the box? Certainly the abstruse motives of polite people are intolerable to the inhabitants of other and kindlier worlds.

In the box opposite to the Stagmars sat Mrs. Kent, Edith, Chatsworth, Miss Felton, and young Van Alyn. Mrs. Kent was stiffly upright, a lorgnette held tremblingly to her eyes which were fastened upon Herbert Stagmar's box with a total disregard for appearances. Edith's face was scarlet, and she talked rapidly and almost senselessly to Malcolm. Mrs. Stagmar was now completely absorbed in Kent, and Courtenay was left to the mercy of Joan's fear. Presently Stillwell Drew and another society man with whom Helen was not acquainted entered the box, Drew in complete ignorance of the real state of affairs, still jealous of his old rival. Again came an effusive welcome from Mrs. Stagmar in the face of the whole house. After this there was an awkward pause, the other man waiting expectantly. Then Stagmar looked up, Kent and Joan watching him fearfully, Courtenay humming a bar or two of the "Dir Tonne Lob!" For the first time in the last ten minutes Stagmar spoke, "Helen, permit me to present Mr. Graeme—my wife, Mrs. Stagmar, Mr. Graeme."

Stillwell Drew turned ashy white. Kent coughed in despair. Graeme bowed and Helen, with her great, dark eyes, smiled somewhat pathetically. Stagmar, sitting nonchalantly upon the rail of the box, was now facing a future. Helplessly, as if to thrust away some much-dreaded misfortune, Joan Howard had put out one white-gloved hand. This hand, Robert Courtenay, with a strange gleam in

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his eyes, impulsively caught, unnoticed by the rest, in his own. Joan drew it away, but Courtenay had felt her tremor of emotion, and was satisfied. The house darkened once more, and the curtain rose. Hastily the four men left the box, to enter it no more. How the gay music that followed dinned into the ears of the three left alone! How the blasts from the trumpets and the high triumphant notes of that swinging march stabbed through their melancholy! It was an hour the agony of which none of them ever forgot. But at least they were less noticed now, on account of the brilliancy of the stage picture. Nevertheless, there were not a few who neglected the maiden sacrifice of Elizabeth and the uncomfortable postures of the motley chorus, to speak in low tones to one another of the social tumult which was stirring, and which would doubtless prove, before the evening's end, something more interesting to watch than the troubles of these far-off mellow-voiced actors.

All who could be supposed to be at all interested in the matter—and these were most of the people in the house—were aware by this time of nearly all that there was to know about the guest who sat in Herbert Stagmar's box. Young Garth—who still retained the memory of the wine-deluge—was responsible for the beginning of it. He, appearing to sympathize with Mrs. Kent's curiosity concerning the doctor's unknown acquaintance, had detailed La Caralita's history, as much as he knew of it, and something more, rapidly and spicily, to that lady during the last two minutes of the intermission. Still, Garth knew nothing of Helen's newly proclaimed wifehood. All that

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he could do was to ignite within Mrs. Kent two fires—one of curiosity to learn more of this woman; and the second, wrath against her husband for knowing her. From the tale-bearer, though not from Eleanor Felton, she concealed these thoughts, only dismissing him from the box with an indifferent and indulging smile.

Garth flitted airy away, and the second act had just begun by the time Kent returned to his place. Mrs. Kent, sitting slightly in front of her daughter, turned immediately toward the doctor. "My dear James, who is the very beautiful woman in Mr. Stagmar's box, with whom you have just been speaking?"

Kent glared at her wearily. "Who it is? It is Mrs. Herbert Stagmar, that's all," he replied, gruffly.

Mrs. Kent gave a violent gasp, as though a quart of iced water had been suddenly dropped over her elaborate coiffure. "James! What do you mean! That creature—"

"I mean precisely that. La Caralita, the dancer of the Moulin Rouge, is Bertie Stagmar's wife. Confound him!" And the little man mopped his brow with a gesture of despair. What was the use in defending the writer now?

Mrs. Kent has no time to answer. On hearing her father's last speech Edith Kent had suddenly half risen to her feet, then, reeling, was caught in Malcolm Van Alyn's arms. She had fainted.

It was several minutes before she regained consciousness, and as soon as she was again herself, the doctor insisted upon her being taken home. Mrs.

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Kent made no objections, but followed the three others, for Malcolm went also, out of the foyer. To herself she was saying, harshly, "It may have been the heat, but really the coincidence was a little too striking."

Poor Edith!

Thus Eleanor Felton and the artist were left unceremoniously alone to finish the evening and ruminate upon the sudden shock to society. The artist was rather glum over the matter.

"This will certainly knock down the last fad for genius, Miss Felton, Mrs. Kent will cut me to-morrow. No egotism intended, I assure you. Think of it! First Snippington—and now—Stagmar! I could never have believed such a thing of Herbert."

"It's not by any means so bad as you think," began Eleanor, vigorously, and then stopped short. She had forgotten her position in the matter. Alas! Eleanor Felton, too, had turned coward. She dared not admit that what all the world shrank from now she herself had excused long ago! No. Society had educated Eleanor Felton. Do not blame her. Horace had looked up eagerly at her words, and she had deliberately put him off. It was over now.

During the middle of the intermission Horace rose. "Miss Felton, Stagmar is alone with the ladies. Here comes Courtenay to see you. Will you excuse me for a few moments while I go to them?"

Eleanor hesitated. "Why go, Horace?" she asked at last. "You have a good deal at stake—your reputation—"

"This from you, Miss Felton! I had not thought

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it. Herbert Stagmar was my father's friend, and he has been mine. *Au revoir.*"

And Eleanor's conscience hurt her painfully as she saw him go. She knew very well that her own place would have been noblest at his side. Again, she dared not.

Poor Eleanor.

That night ended, as he had known it would, Herbert Stagmar's social career. He and all his household were under the ban, a ban far more to be dreaded by a member of society than had been papal excommunication in a Catholic country. It meant loneliness, terrible, desolation forlorn, isolation entire, ostracism complete. And so far as I know, not a single pitying voice out of all the myriad former sycophants who had surrounded Stagmar, was raised in his defense. Perhaps only one there was, and that a woman, defenseless, who even wished to speak; she was the bride-elect to Malcolm Van Alyn.

CHAPTER XXVI

A WEDDING HOUR.

"Are these the last, Edith? Very well. The last fifty are here, Miss Allison. It will not take you an hour more. Almost too many, I think, as it is. Eight hundred for the church and three for the house. Now, really, I must lie down for a little. This has been such exacting work, and there is the Prestwell's dinner to-night. You will remain until it is finished, Edith."

So spoke Mrs. Kent as she rose from the chair in her dressing-room, where she had for the last two hours been overseeing the directing of the last invitations for Edith's approaching marriage. It is a great task, indeed, nowadays, the sending forth to one's eight or nine hundred acquaintances all the announcements, cards, for church and home, and the rest of the paraphernalia by means of which we think it fit to make known that a child of ours is about to be joined in holy matrimony to the man she—may love.

To the great satisfaction of her mother, her fiancé and his family, Edith had at last consented to set the date for her wedding. Why should she not? she asked herself bitterly. Malcolm was a good boy, and would do anything in the world for her except release her, now that they had at last come together again.

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She was sure that he would be very kind to her, and under his golden fetter felt that she would have more freedom both of body and spirit than under her mother's iron yoke. Well and good, so far as it goes. And if we go further, it must be without Edith herself. Though the wound is an ugly one, and will not soon heal, none the less she steadfastly denies the existence in her heart of the hole where a name which was graven there has been cut out. The name was that of a man which, alas! was now but seldom spoken, but was once famous and unimpeachable in honor. And whatever the fever of the girl's hurt, she never outwardly betrayed her pain. Her docility about her wedding since that opera night had entirely dispelled any suspicions that Mrs. Kent had secretly entertained over her daughter's unlucky fainting spell. So upon this score Edith was happily let alone. But despite all the girl's effort at control, the thought of that name, the name of Herbert Stagmar, became sometimes so unendurable to her that at last she had in self-pity asked that the ceremony which should give her to Van Alyn might be soon performed.

Fortunately Edith Kent had never permitted herself to hope that she might enjoy the peace of a small, sacred marriage ceremony. Therefore the exhibition now being arranged for her did not much disturb her equanimity. She had become indifferent about it, having long been resigned to her mother's disposition. Though she and her father sometimes made common cause of ideas in secret, these always melted and vanished away into thin air before the straightly proper complacency of the wife and mother. Mrs. Kent

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forced her intentions well into her family's minds. Edith daily haunted shops and odd tucked-away corners of store-dom where laces and fine linens lay hid. And she consented without a murmur to remain for hours upon her feet while the long court train of her wedding dress was draped into exact shimmering folds, and the scroll-work of pearl flowers laid upon her dress, and the two yellow roses which were to be embroidered in a corner of the train were carefully marked out. Then again the plans for their city establishment were made and discussed, and these Edith resisted with all the force of her will. She hated the city, she said, and declared that not for a time, at least, would she live there.

"I want to travel—to wander about, to pass the days in new places; to see where unhappy, famous people have lived and died," she repeated over and over again to her lover, until Malcolm was won completely to her way of thinking, and Mrs. Kent was for the time defeated.

Upon the night when the last envelope had been mailed, when finally all the invitations were gone, the doctor's last sarcasm vouchsafed, unheeded, and Mrs. Kent's last sigh of complacency given, Edith crept up to her bedroom with face pale and all her nerves alive. Her maid was there, ready to prepare her for the night. Edith dismissed her uneasily, and waited, standing in the middle of the room, till the girl had gone. Then, crossing hastily to her desk, she sat down before it, and began to look through her drawers, scanning the sheets of note and writing-paper eagerly. It was a foolish thing. Upon every

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one was her monogram and address, on each envelope the family crest—oh, democratic America! She had no plain paper, yet she needed it. Presently she rang, and waited impatiently for the appearance of her maid.

"Julie, have you any writing-paper?"

"Why, yes, Miss Edith."

"Has it any mark on it? Your initials, perhaps?"

"No, Miss Edith."

"Julie, I am very much in need of such a sheet of paper, and envelope. Will you—will you give one of yours to me?"

"Shall I get it for you now?" asked the girl, without a sign of surprise or curiosity in her pleasant face.

"Thank you—if you will, please."

In three minutes there lay before Edith on her desk a large square white envelope and two sheets of oily white paper which did not match their destined wrapper. Scarcely an aristocratic outfit! Edith thanked the girl gratefully, and a moment later was alone.

It took her a long while to write her letter, yet the epistle was short. It covered little more than one side of one of the ruled sheets. When it was done she did not read it over—not daring to think too much of the few full sentences it contained. She slipped it immediately into the envelope, together with a card of entrance to the church. Then she sealed it fast, and wrote upon it outside the name and address of her haunting shadow. Her heart was lighter. The past was closed. None the less her white hands still trembled as she unbound by herself the heavy locks of yel-

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low hair. The pain of parting is not always sweet. But before she lay in bed that night her little maid had stolen from the house and dropped into the neighboring letter-box that last message of hers to her prostrate god.

When his morning mail reached him Stagmar was at luncheon with his wife. This meal was no longer served by Carson, the magnificent. He was gone to find a place where his penchant for the highest and best (?) would serve him in better stead than in this gloomy and deserted household. Helen had felt extreme relief when she learned that she was to be no longer exposed to the scorn of his haughty glance, and she was vastly easier now before the observance of the quiet little waitress who had succeeded his highness. Meals were still not pleasant things, for the emptiness of the house and their lives oppressed all three; and indeed Joan but rarely came to the table, preferring to remain in the accustomed quiet of her father's study, which his spirit dominated still. To Helen, then, as they sat alone together, it was Stagmar's custom, as it had been in an earlier day, to read aloud portions of his mail which might amuse his wife. There were still endless requests for autographs from the author, many of them supremely ridiculous. And there were demands for photographs from distantly worshiping maidens, and all the usual penalties which one must pay for fame and a striking face.

The author was entirely unfamiliar with Miss Kent's writing, and the paper which bore it would, in any case, have concealed its identity. He opened it

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with the rest, and began to read. After the first simple words he stopped short, and turning over the page, glanced at the signature. The flush which mounted his cheek and the gleam which shot from his eyes at sight of it were both noted by his wife, into whose heart entered a jealous fear.

"Never mind that one, Herbert," she said lightly. "Read me something less serious."

He glanced over at her quickly, and for one brief moment their eyes met. Then she went on again with her salad, and he laid the missive down beside him on the table. He did not read it till he was alone, and then he devoured it hungrily, slowly, eagerly.

If not so much in words, at least in expression, Edith had told her heart to him. He read and understood it all, as she had thought he would. The letter had been but an impulse on her part, and as such he treated it with the highest respect, and an unutterable, silent grief. Delicately he handled the paper, yet studied each firm, straight stroke of the fine pen. Finally, taking it very carefully, he cut off the signature at the bottom, and one other name which the letter contained, and burned them together in the fire on his hearth. After that he folded the paper and thrust the short, precious note into the breast pocket of his old brown suit. He had made it safe; now it might become his talisman.

Helen Howard also had thought about this letter which he had not read aloud; had thought about it more than he could have guessed. But Helen's heart was straight, and her pity for the unhappiness of her husband, which she saw was far greater than her own,

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in their strange position, made her willing to bear much, silently, rather than feel that he might have the right to reproach her for making his lot harder than it already was. And Stagmar was not unaware of many instances of her unselfishness. Upon every occasion he treated her with more than respect, with great consideration. But this was all. He could not force himself to love her again. That love was dead, he thought; and he had no power to work miracles. Ah! a wretched tangle, this marriage! Could the acknowledgment of it have been, after all, a mistake? Nay, it was done. What more can be said?

The Stagmars were not asked to the Kent-Van-Alyn wedding, of course. No one had for a moment thought they would be, least of all the Stagmars themselves. Joan was not surprised; nevertheless, she was hurt. One does not get used to cuts all in a day or two. Sometimes she thought of Malcolm, and wondered what would have happened had she not herself broken her engagement to him. Malcolm, like most of the others, knew her no longer. Edith Kent still bowed slightly, but without a smile; and Mrs. Kent seemed to have developed a positive genius for looking through, over, and under her without seeing her, as though she were a bit of window-glass suspended in space. Jim Kent had once visited their house, but his furtiveness about it put Stagmar on his mettle, and he quietly told him not to come again, which advice the doctor regretfully obeyed. Horace Chatsworth was at the house early and late, and his visits and the unfailing attendance of Robert Courtenay were the only solaces left to the forlorn trio.

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By Easter-tide the silence in the great house was become nearly unbearable.

It was on a Wednesday evening in the second week in April that Edith became Mrs. Van Alyn. In the evening at eight the ceremony was to take place, and on the following day the two young people were to leave their city for a world-round voyage. All day long, upon her last maiden morning, Edith moved about the familiar places in a dreary dream. She could not think of what lay before her, of this one evening and then the days to come, the many, many years of days to come. It was not till Malcolm came cheerily in to see her in the late afternoon that she could smile. Then, suddenly, a moment of gladness was given her. He was so young, so boyish, so buoyant, so innocently jolly that she felt at once easy with him.

Oh! It is well for men that the impresses of some moments do not forever seam the open hearts of these clear-eyed boys; that their breath does not forever reek with the vile decoctions drunk so frequently; that eyes are not always feverishly blood-shot, having once been so; that hands, after some hours' rest, can be no longer tremblingly cold and clutching as at the cards which will not win the little heaps of red and blue disks that litter the dark green table. Tempora! mores! Are you really worse at one epoch than another?

But to Edith Kent Malcolm had always been the same. He was still to her the playfellow, brother, comrade that he had always been. How, then, to regard him as a husband? But better he than any

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one else, whom she did not love—and Edith shuddered as she thought. Malcolm anxiously regarded her.

"You don't look at bit well," he said.

"Oh, I am!" she replied, smilingly. "But I am nervous. Now confess that you are a little bit so yourself."

"Not a whit," he insisted stoutly. "Besides, you seem to have forgotten the last rehearsal that is to save us all. I came to get you for it now. Come, we must go down."

"To be sure. Papa is going with us. I'll get him and be here directly."

The rehearsal of arrangements was very tiresome. It was gone over a dozen times and it seemed to Edith that no one even tried to understand what was to be done. She forgot that to the lively bridesmaids and groomsmen this was merely an occasion for immense frivolity, flirtation, and general amusement. She could not see why they all enjoyed it. They in turn wondered at her listlessness, and Malcolm regarded her with troubled eyes. Only her father seemed to understand her, and his old arm trembled as he conducted her down the aisle and gave her away again and again. It was an intense relief when she was at home for the last hours. The last hours! With each tick of the clock in her room her heart throbbed painfully. She was rejoiced to think that no decorous dinner could be gone through with to-night, for the house was in confusion with preparations for the immense reception to follow the wedding. The caterers had long since arrived, the

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servants were busily at work, Mrs. Kent was in tears of nervousness, the doctor heavy-hearted and quietly authoritative; and now had come the time for Edith to be dressed. It was a long ordeal, which she endured with passive dullness. After two long hours under the hands of maids and hair-dressers, she was finished; the long court train, with its fastings of pearl butterflies, upon her shoulders; the stars, also of those softly-tinted jewels, upon the point-lace about her white throat; the long pearl chain from Malcolm about her neck; her glove-finger slit; her veil, with its spray of lilies-of-the-valley, adjusted; her bouquet of ascension lilies ready.

"And now," she said, in a low, broken voice, "leave me alone for fifteen minutes. I must have that!"

Quietly, almost with reverence, the little group left her room. Their torturing tasks were over. Edith breathed deeply once, and flung her hands above her head. Simultaneously there came a timid rap at the door. She opened it impatiently. Upon the threshold stood Julie with a box in her hands, a jewel box of pale velvet.

"I beg pardon, Miss Edith. A present, marked 'personal.'"

Mechanically the bride took it into her hands and flung open the cover. Upon a card within were written the words, "For To-night, from A Memory." That was all. There was no name.

There, upon the satin lining, lay a wreathy crown of forget-me-nots in turquoises. Tiny pearls formed the centers of the flowers, and the leaves were of deli-

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cately quivering gold. The girl gave a tremulous cry. Well she knew who had sent it. Taking the box to the table before her mirror, she stood for a few moments examining the fastenings of her veil. Then rapidly she took the flowers from her head, and with shaking hands placed the fairy-like thing in its place. It gave the last touch to her costume. Claspings her hands before her she stood still, as though gazing at herself; but the image that she saw was blurred and indistinct for her eyes, as well as her heart, were full. These last moments of her own were not what she had intended them to be. Her mind was not on herself, but another, and as she thought of him the lights grew dim, the room whirled mistily about her, the world jangled in her ears.

Then a timid rap came at the door, and Julie's voice without said: "Miss Edith! shall I come in? The carriage is here!" Edith Kent had slipped to her knees on the floor, with her satin garments trailing about her. She pressed her cold hands unsteadily against her throbbing temples. Then slowly she rose and drew her train over her arm. Some one threw her white cloak over her. She heard her mother raise her voice in tones of affected rapture:

"Ah, what a dear boy Malcolm is! A magnificent wreath, my dear! What devotion to you! It is charming!"

And Edith smiled vaguely, and went to her father, little Doctor Jim. She had bidden farewell to her girlhood. She was ready.

By eight o'clock the church was crowded, and the ushers were anxiously wondering where it would be

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possible to stow away any more important old ladies who would be sure to require a good seat. The long rows of candles before the altar burned brilliantly. Within as well as without it was very warm, and a myriad of pale fans were fluttering. The white-robed choir-boys took their places promptly. From the organ came indistinct, Aeolian music, and in a darkened room, in a lonely house not far away, a man sat before a desk, and with his eyes closed and his strong face set in hard lines of mental pain, pictured to himself, with imagination fevered, this sanctified scene. Herbert Stagmar had not obeyed her last request of him.

At a quarter after eight the bridal party formed outside the door of the central aisle. Within the body of the church came the first low strains of the Lohengrin march, which brought the buzz of conversation to an end. The heavy doors were thrown open, the little procession entered, and passed slowly up the aisle, Edith leaning so heavily upon her father's arm that he looked down at her in anxious surprise once or twice. But it was an agony to her to walk. She saw not one of the throng of friends who rose simultaneously at her royal approach. She was so tall, so pale, so tearless, so like the lilies that rose from her hand! The one eager thought within her mind was to reach the altar quickly and have it over. She knew that Herbert Stagmar was not there. One swift, embracing glance had told her that. He had not done for her what she had asked. Ah! Would this fearful march never end?

They had reached the steps which led up into the

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at liberty to tell you that. It is a very old and a very dear friend; that is all. I must ask you to leave the matter there."

And that was all that she would ever say. To give him his just credit, Malcolm himself did not again refer to it. The costly crown in its pale casket had fulfilled its mission. It had lain upon her head during her marriage, and she never wore it again. By the time that Edith Van Alyn had become old and wise enough to be taken away from earth, her husband had become all in all to her, and the memory of that youthful, romantic pain had grown dim. The very name of the Herbert Stagmar she had known rarely came to her mind, and he was, in after years, only the man who had written that long row of well-bound books which filled a shelf in her library near the one on which stood the kindred novels of Thackeray, and Balzac, and George Eliot.

CHAPTER XXVII

THREE BECAME TWO.

Two days after Edith's wedding Robert Courtenay and Joan Howard sat together and alone in the little Turkish den. They no longer resorted to the great empty drawing-room which fronted lonesomely upon the avenue. In these days it was too large, and dreary, and silent. But here, in the brilliant little Oriental corner, the constraint, despite the memory of that first encounter between them which had taken place here, was entirely obliterated from their intercourse. Now a tiny coffee service stood before the girl on a little stand, and the cups were still empty, for Courtenay had not been there long. An unlit Turkish cigarette was between his fingers as he lay comfortably back in an arm-chair, a thing somewhat unsuited to the idea of the room. Joan faced him, with a small cushioned divan, upon which she was reclining carelessly. Nowadays they were again at ease with each other. That silence which is the most thorough proof of understanding and sympathy was unbroken for some minutes; then Robert straightened a little.

"Will you have coffee?" asked Joan.

"Thank you, no; not yet."

The voice of each had slightly roused the other.

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Courtenay unclosed his eyes and looked questioningly at his companion. "Mrs. Stagmar at home?"

"She and my father are driving together."

"Driving together! Then it is settled that—"

"Oh, quite. Surely, you never had hoped that my father would abandon his resolve?"

Courtenay smiled at her lazily. "For my sake, I am glad," he said, enigmatically.

Joan looked at him. "I understand. You like to exercise your strain of Bohemianism on us now," she said, with something like bitterness in her voice. This he instantly understood.

"Oh, no; I didn't mean it in that way."

"Oh, but you did, you know. However, it may pass. But do you never go among any but entirely conventional people?"

The man flushed a little and laughed. "Never mind what you fancied I meant. I have forgotten what we are talking about."

"You meant, did you not," she calmly persisted, "that it was pleasant to be able to lead one on who—who—is no longer of any importance in your world?"

He looked at her piercingly. "All men are fools. Did you know that, Joan?"

"Yes, Mr. Courtenay."

Again he laughed. "Could you not—a—stretch a point and call me Robert, or, even more comfortably, Bob? When we are alone, of course," he added.

"No, I think not. I am afraid that I should hardly be elastic enough. I might not fly back into the last name when we should not be alone."

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"Then I must call you Miss Howard, as you once advised me to, I suppose?"

"Upon what occasion was that?" she asked, indifferently. "I have forgotten it. I do not mind your calling me Joan. It is quite what one might expect from any one so much older than I. You are really a friend of the family, you know."

Courtenay did not answer. Joan perceived instinctively that he was as angry as she had tried to make him, though the calm nonchalance of his manner betrayed no feeling. Now ensued a period of silence so long, so unusual, so unbreakable, that Miss Howard at length considered the propriety of taking up a book. It was perhaps half an hour before Robert stood up, looking singularly pale. Before he spoke he grasped a cup, and pouring into it some of the thick, cold Turkish coffee, drained it at a swallow. Then going to her, he looked straight into her passive face.

"Joan," in a very low voice. "Joan, I love you, dearly, deeply. Will you be my wife?"

Joan looked up at him calmly. "Really, Mr. Courtenay, do you imagine me so great a fool as all this?"

"How can you! No, I understand it. I only repeat to you again that you—you are dearer to me than anything on God's earth. I love you. Will you be my wife?"

Even then it was hard for her to believe his earnestness. Long and closely she scanned his steady, earnest face. At last, with a sudden flush of scarlet, she whispered unsteadily, "You don't realize—"

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"Yes, I realize. What else?" he questioned, impatiently.

After a second, then, Joan threw up her heavy head and looked into his eyes, with a deep, quivering breath. Her words came in a torrent—passionate, expressionless. "Yes! yes! yes! I will marry you! But not all for love. I want to be taken away, away from this fearful loneliness. See what my father and mother did. When I did not ask it, they gave me everything, everything in the world. Then, when I felt that I could never be without it, they took it all away again—ay, worse than all. I am left utterly desolate. I adore you—I have done so since the first time I ever saw you. But you must take me away to be married. We must never come back. Nobody must know. Will you do this?"

With a smile at her vehemence, he held out his hand, and with a little quick breath she took it. "Do you realize that you are planning an elopement?" he asked, looking down at her with lovelight in his eyes.

"Call it what you like. Oh, Robert, it is asking too much of you! I didn't think of it—of your position here."

"Then don't think of it now. It is less than nothing to me. I must merely part with Williams; and, since I get you in exchange, I am longing for him to go immediately." He was laughing now, but she was very serious.

"You are doing everything—for me."

"And when do you want to start? Soon, is it not?" He drew her again to the divan, and sat down

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by her. She was doing her best to calm her excitement, and his calmness helped her.

"Soon? Oh, yes. To-night—is that possible?"

"Hardly to-night, I'm afraid. You see it is nearly six now. But to-morrow night, if you can be ready."

"Oh, by to-morrow, surely. I cannot take very much, and you see—I have so little—money—" Her face flushed again as she whispered these last words.

"'With all my worldly goods I thee endow!'" he answered her, smiling dreamily. He felt himself as in a dream, for he was thinking of his first courtship—the cold question, the calm affirmative reply, and the pleasant reflection that his wife would always have more than enough to keep herself upon. He had never felt toward Marie anything warmer than approving indifference. And now, with Joan, everything was precisely the opposite. It was a thought of exquisite joy that this beautiful girl before him would have to look to him for everything she should possess in the world. For her he gave up everything also. His position, his habits, his pleasures, would all be swept away from him, and only she should take their place. Visions of a nomadic Bohemian existence rose up before him. She should be beside him. He was satisfied.

"We shall wander, dear. The wide earth and oblivion to all mankind lie before us. Which shall it be first? Europe or Asia?"

"Neither, Robert." And now the tears were in Joan's gray eyes. "First of all to the valley of San Gabriel, where I lived for so long, and where I used

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to dream of you, long before I saw you. After that wherever you please."

Half an hour later, Joan stole off to her room alone, while the voices of her father and mother sounded in the hall below. Courtenay was gone, but oh, for so short a time! She was too happy to see any one just yet. Humbly she knelt at the foot of her long unused Madonna shrine, but the words that came from her lips were neither aves nor paternosters, yet perhaps on high more sanctified than either.

Meantime Herbert Stagmar was drawing the cloak from his wife's shoulders and speaking with her in a most punctilious tone. He was always studiously polite, but never anything more. In vain he had striven to feel his real relationship with her. He failed signally. Helen had felt it, and taken it to heart. She could find no good in this arrangement. By it he had lost his position, she her somewhat wretched freedom, and both of them were seriously uncomfortable when together. So, when he had this time, as usual, removed her wrap, and she was busy with a small, flowery bonnet, she turned to him rather sharply:

"Now go on to your own work or pleasure, or whatever you have to do. By this time I can find my way to the room which you have given me. As a matter of fact, my dear Herbert, I am not the ex-Empress of France, nor yet a feminine burglar who has come to pay you a visit."

He laughed slightly, and then turned serious again. "I am sorry that I do not put you at your ease," he said.

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"Oh, I do not blame you. You have lived so long here without me that it is not possible now for you to look upon me as a wife. But please remember that I didn't come back of my own accord. Great heavens, Herbert! Do you imagine that I haven't given up something also, in coming here to live in idle comfort? Don't you know that I loved that other life where I was free—as the air we breathe?"

"*Were* you free, Helen?" he questioned kindly, drawing her with him into his study, and closing the door.

"Yes, I was free. I lived in my own way, and the time that I gave to others was given because I wished it. Here there are no others. You are very lonely. I suppose that it is my coming here which has made it so. I'm sorry, but it is not my fault. Oh, Herbert! if only you were poor!"

"Poor? Why?"

"Because then I should help to earn our living—yours, and Joan's, and mine. I could easily command higher pay than any dancer before the public. Why, Herbert, in my way I am famous."

"I know," he said sternly. "And I thank God that we have more than enough money to live upon. I could not have you make a public spectacle of yourself again. As for me, it seems that I can write no longer. Oh, if you could but see the trash that has come from my pen in the last two weeks! It is too wretched to be believed, Helen. My worth is over, I think. Heretofore my life has been careless enough to enable me to give all my brain to my pen. It is different now." He became heartless and forgetful

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of her. "My existence was perfect in those days. It was as untroubled as—the depths of a tropical jungle. I studied art, life, happiness, misery from a vantage-ground which I myself had created, and the world bowed before me. Ten months ago my whole orbit of being was clear, straight, light. My life was flawless."

"You lie!" she cried out suddenly, stamping her foot. "Your life was lived among a low class, and it was not perfect. You yourself did not sin. You were too sensitive for that. But the men all about you, with whom you lived, did sin, and you knew it. You knew that at heart they were vile and low, but because their bodies were clean and their clothes spotless, you shut your inner eyes and smiled at them and grasped their hands. You didn't loathe them as they should have been loathed; you did not hate them as I did—all of them!"

"As you did!" and his tone was incredulous.

"Yes, as I—even I, who forgot myself for them, hated and despised them all. How many of them are better than that Snippington whom you all shudder at now? Does a profession change the very instincts of a man? The reason I came so to look up to you as some one far beyond every one else was because I knew that you were not gross. I believed that you stood above all of that, even in your thoughts, and nobody knows how I worshipped you for it. But it seems different to me now. I find that you thought that your life among these impure men, and among the women who knew their impurity, but smilingly passed it over, and fought for attentions from them,

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was the most perfect that could be lived. Your life and the lives of all these people are unnatural, distorted, grotesque. Your only real pleasure in the midst of apparent continued delights is the fact that the rest of the world envies you and your kind. The crumbs from your feasts which they gather up on their way behind you do not show them the real sickening nature of the food. You live upon honey; they have it only for dessert. Your lives are timeless, seasonless. You are continually wishing for something new, and you labor under the delusion that novelty means only the old things turned upside down. How ridiculous that is! You shun the sun, and do most of your living in the glare of artificial lights. Your wit is the ridiculing of everything that should be held in reverence. Good breeding is the avoiding of truth, honesty, openness. To be continually weary—'blasé,' you call it—is the aim of existence. To pamper every desire or whim, to pour out money like the wine you waste, upon useless, silly things, is what is expected from every person, rich or dishonest, who has managed to enter into the charmed circle. Affectation is the very essence of their being, rivalry and jealousy their flesh and blood, hypocrisy their wardrobe. And you, Herbert Staggmar, you to whom was given a great intellect, you regard this as something to be coveted! This worship of *things* as a vision, a flower that has died in your hands! Oh, Herbert, it isn't that! It's more like the ravings of a drunkard, who has long since ceased to perceive the difference between a healthy, common view of life and the distorted vagaries of his delirium!"

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Helen paused rather suddenly, and looked at him with something like apprehension. She had gone farther than she meant to do. Her husband had listened to her long and impassioned speech intently, never removing his eyes from her transformed face. "Helen," he said at last, "it is strange that I should never have done you justice. When was it that you learned so much so well?"

"I am a woman," she said, sighing a little, yet with relief in her face. "And while you were dreaming through your happiness I was passing through my time of greatest suffering."

He came forward to her with his hands outstretched. "My wife," he said, "it is really you, not I, who should have been called Herbert Stagmar. A great life has been lost to the world in you. I am truly astounded. You must have thought through a great many hours during your dancing days, my dear."

She smiled back at him, but her eyes were moist. "Ah, Herbert, I had an early intercourse with one who knew, remember. That was worth all the world to me. I think sometimes that you were greater then in your enthusiasm and your poverty than now."

"And I, Helen," he answered very sadly, "I do not think—I know that it is so."

"Dinner is served, sir," came the maid's voice at the door.

"Oh!" cried Helen, "I should not have stayed so long! I am disreputable!"

"No more so than I am," he answered, laughing. "Come, let us go. We can ask Joan's pardon."

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It was a light-hearted meal. Even Joan Howard, through the veil of her new and secret happiness, could see that the relations between her father and mother were far warmer than they had been heretofore. Stagmar's spirits rose as his eyes met those of his wife over the steaming bouillon cups. It was a pleasantly lonely evening.

The next day dawned and wearily spun out its hours. To Joan the time was interminable. With the greatest thought and care she prepared herself for her midnight flight. There would be nothing difficult about it. All that she could attempt to take was a small satchel with her necessities in it, and besides this the chamois bag which held her jewels and what money she possessed. By ten in the morning these details were finished, and the rest of the day was all to be idle. By the afternoon mail came a short note from Courtenay, repeating to her every part of the plan, and bidding her be faithful. This was all. And now, with the dying of the April day and the fast approach of night, Joan Stagmar's heart beat tumultuously. At nine o'clock she went to her room, and there rapidly redressed herself from head to foot. She wore a spring suit of grayish blue, and a small staw hat, for the days were already warm. By ten she was quite ready, and there were still two endless hours to wait. But Joan's heart and mind were very full, and she sat quite motionless by her window, now and again murmuring something like a prayer, and thinking, a little timidly, of the great new life that was stretching out before her. So, when finally her time was up, and the clock of the church in the

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square beyond was finally striking its heavy chimes, it came as a little shock to her. She stood bravely up, however, grasping her bag in one hand. Never before had those carved oaken stairs seemed to her so numerous, never had they creaked so persistently with each careful step. A wave of terror swept over her with the thought that very possibly her father might be in his study. In the hallway she stopped short, scarcely breathing. It must be half-past twelve, she thought to herself in an agony. Would Courtenay wait for her? Now she stood shakingly before the great doors, the last barriers between herself and he unsoftened world. For one instant she looked back at the black space behind her which had seen so much of the joy and fear of her life, and then, being young and restive, she turned without a tremor of prophetic vision toward her love. There was scarce a thought for the father and the mother she left in the rooms above. It was afterward that she thought of them. Now two turns of the slender wrist, a faint noise as the doors closed behind her, and with a low cry she ran into the waiting arms of Robert Courtenay.

At the curb stood a brougham with a coachman, curious and impassive, upon the box. Hurriedly they entered the carriage and sped away through the dusky streets.

"Where do we go first?"

"To St. Matthew's church."

"Bob! Bob! How good you are! That was what I had so wished for—to be married in a church! Who is to do it?"

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"We are to be well married, dear. The bishop himself."

"Bishop Cleering! How did you manage it?"

"He is an old friend."

Joan did not answer, but only sighed in perfect content as Robert Courtenay lifted one of her hands to his lips in the darkness.

St. Matthew's was not far from the Stagmars' house. To Joan, who was beginning to be nervously afraid of pursuit, it seemed that her father must be almost within speaking distance when they alighted at the structure whose lofty black steeples rose toweringly against the velvet midnight sky. The church door opened with a clang under Courtenay's hands. Within, far down at the chancel, glimmered half a dozen puny lights. Joan was trembling now, and Robert supported her as they went together down the aisle. Their wedding march sounded only within their hearts.

Up before the faintly lighted altar stood the old bishop in his robes, and with him two assistants who were afterward to act as witnesses to the marriage.

"Robert, I wish I had a veil," whispered Joan, gently dropping Courtenay's arm.

"The night is thy veil, beloved," he answered softly.

In the darkness she smiled.

They stood together before the consecrated of God, from whose lips fell the words of the shortened marriage ceremony. Joan was self-possessed now, and her response, "I will," was given with such calm

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earnestness that the bishop was well satisfied, and Courtenay's deep eyes were bent upon her in approval.

"Let us pray."

There upon the carpeted pavement which had so short a time ago been swept by the satin skirts and train of Edith Van Alyn, Joan Howard Stagmar's knees were also pressed, and the same accents of that same old, old prayer, hallowed throughout nearly twenty centuries of reverent use, fell upon her fervent ears. The second prayer followed, the address to the assembled people omitted; the benediction was pronounced. Like one in a dream Joan rose up, and dimly perceived that the bishop was shaking her hand. Then a book, wherein was written a record of the marriage, was produced.

"Will you be so good as to sign your name, Mrs. Courtenay," and Robert was holding a pen out to her. Now the first great joy of her wedding came to her with her new name. Courtenay's strong signature came after hers, and then those of the witnesses. So were they joined together, these two, after a strange courtship; bound by a tie of fierce love which was not easily to die. Up the aisle and out again into the night they passed, man and wife. A moment later and the brougham had driven rapidly away.

"And now, Robert, where?" asked the bride, gently.

"To your valley of San Gabriel, our paradise, my wife." And so these two well-known friends pass out of our story forever.

Neither Herbert Stagmar nor his wife was particularly surprised next morning when Joan failed to

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appear at breakfast time. She was not often late, but she was not infallible, and no one was sent to her room to rouse her earlier than necessary into the dreariness of the waking world. His first morning mail was brought to Stagmar at the table, since he was waiting impatiently for an important message from a publisher. His letter had not come yet, but over his coffee he broke open two or three missives. From habit, not curiosity, Helen watched him closely. On the last note that he opened she recognized the seal, and quivered a little, as she always did at a memory. The seal was Courtenay's. Stagmar had not read two lines when the color suddenly left his lips.

"What is it, Herbert?" asked the dancer, leaning over the table in sudden apprehension. Stagmar rose hastily.

"Go to the study and wait there for me, Helen. I will be with you in one moment."

With fierce haste he disappeared from the dining-room and ran up the great staircase to his daughter's room. A short search among her effects was enough. Helen was, pacing the library when he entered it. Her face was frightened.

"What is it? Tell me! tell me—"

Silently he handed her Courtenay's letter, and seated himself quietly while she read it. It did not take her long. At her low sob he smiled sadly.

"Well, she has gone, Helen, my dear. It was a strange chance that was given her, and that she took. But her life is her own. She is of age. I will make sure that the marriage was perfectly legal,

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though of that I have not much doubt. Courtenay loved her, and he is no cad. As for us, we are left alone again—you and I—and that—is all—there is to say.”

“But—but—oh, Herbert! Courtenay—of all!” The woman’s face was buried in her hands. Stagmar understood her without more words on her part. Without looking at her he held out his strong hand. She grasped it, and knelt beside him.

“Why think of that, Helen? It is an ordinary thing. Now it is past, and regrets for the past are useless. Why should we little mortals spend our lives in remorse? We have not too long to live. At the end of our three-score years our light flashes out, and we enter the blankness of the beyond.”

“Do you believe that?” she asked, in a low voice.

“It is most comforting to me,” he answered, and they were both silent for a little, till Helen rose.

“Come, then, Herbert, let us go away. In some other land there may be happiness for us. Let us try at any rate. Ah! How terrible this city is to me!”

He faced her. “Yes, Helen, we will go to join that scattered nation into which we were born. The place I usurped in another land for a little has rightly gone from me. Across the seas, then, forever—into the Bohemia which is ours by right of birth, will, deed, solitude, and lack of law!”

“But,” answered his wife, lifting her eyes to his, bravely, “to our child we have left a better place. We have become something better than descendants. We are ancestors.”

EPILOGUE

THE PASSING OF ONE.

It was late in the afternoon of a November day, and the lifeless streets of a great city were rapidly darkening. Within the heart of the city lay a certain small square, in the center of which clustered many shrubs and small trees, whose bare branches shone wet and glistening with slow, cold rain in the misty light of an electric globe on the corner. About the heavy stone buildings the wind rushed with a moaning swish. The street was empty of life.

Within one of the houses on this square, in a large and gloomy room, heavily furnished, stood a bed of ancient carven oak, canopied and curtained in crimson. Here, raised high upon pillows and lightly covered over with linen sheets and spread, lay the figure of an old man. The white face, framed in whiter hair, was strongly molded, and imperious even in weakness of body. The mouth was haughty, the nostrils sensitive, the forehead broad—as of old; for this was Herbert Stagmar, and Herbert Stagmar was dying in the distant city of Berlin.

The darkened room was now lighted only by the faint glimmering of two waxen candles which burned upon a small altar standing in a corner. The man upon the bed was alone, and his eyes were closed.

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Presently the portieres that hid the door were pushed aside, and a woman, clad in trailing garments of black, entered and crossed immediately to the bedside. There she lingered, gazing mournfully over the face and figure of him from whom she had not now been separated for twenty years. As one of her slender hands, timeworn but very white, rested lightly upon his, which lay at his side, the pallid lips of Herbert Stagmar moved a little, a breath floated from his mouth, and the woman caught the tenderly spoken name, "Helen."

Down upon her kness by his side she sank, her hand tightly clasping his.

"Herbert, oh, Herbert!" and the tone was one of pleading which was almost agonized, "Herbert, once more, will you not let me send for a priest? A Protestant minister—even a Bible, a prayer—let *me* read to you only a word, dear—I cannot bear to think—"

For one brief moment the man's eyes closed again, and the lines about his brows deepened. "No," he said, faintly and decisively. "For the last time, I repeat that I acknowledge nothing—nay, I deny—I deny—all."

Helen Stagmar, with an unstified sob, rose to her feet and crossed slowly to the prie-dieu. The silence that reigned now in the room for a quarter of an hour was disturbed only by the faint clicking of rosary beads as they slipped through the fingers of the woman. But Herbert Stagmar heeded them not.

Indeed, he did not even hear them, for all his remaining life was now concentrated into a final agony of thought. How is it for one thus imperious in spirit

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to die? How is it for any one to die? Oh! When we come to the actual moment of it, it is a thing too awful to be realized, no matter how little we have dreaded it in healthy life. Now Herbert Stagmar was alone, face to face with the still veiled Hereafter. In life he had always said that he was but an atom of the universe, doomed some day to an eternal death. Now it seemed to him that nothing mortal could be so filled with the horror of silence, the vehemence of suppressed longing. Why should one suddenly be, in the world, only after sixty short years to sink once more into nothingness and the tomb? Feebly the dying man unclenched one hand.

He who holds belief of life and mercy hereafter, who is, in his heart, sure of the best, who never, living, has dreaded dying—even he, standing at the end of the path which is not to be retraveled, looks into the unbroken blackness ahead with a shudder, and turns to stretch out his arms hopelessly to that light behind. Such a one might be willing, glad to go through all the miseries and unhappiness of earth life again, when he finds the old sight departing from the old eyes, feels the clasp of the warm brother-hand in his grow gradually less perceptible, knows that his time to pass away from all those hearts hot with grief of parting is come. He knows that that going is forever, that ages shall pass and his body be dust, yet he be living still—how, where? Oh, the terror of that question! The awe of utter loneliness, the solitude of the departure! Herbert Stagmar, bitter with years of unbelief, thought of these things, and grimly closed his eyes. He was going to nothingness, to

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hopeless oblivion. A strange old man, gentle only with one, cherishing two memories. Both lay far back now in his life, and yet his youth and middle age, spent among his people in his own land, were far nearer to his heart than the long twenty years of exile that had followed them. Twenty years! Gray years! He and Helen were old. Ay, it was time that he should go. The brilliant fire of his fame had long ago died down. The last five years had seen it become only a bed of embers, which, to be sure, still held within it the spark of future glory, but was now overtopped by a dozen upstart little flames which the father fire itself had erstwhile kindled.

Future glory! What was that to the dying one? The voice of his brain was whispering weakly; his eyes grew dim; he lay alone, save for one faithful companion. He was forgotten. Herbert Stagmar was forgotten! For the last time on earth the sun had set for him, and to-morrow who would there be to speak his name in regret? Who was left of all those old companions? Where were they? Blackness and oblivion!

Ever that recurring thought. Why should it go? That worn frame was shaken with anguish. Oblivion, dust, nothingness. Life should cease. His brief moment of strength and reason was gone. Already just before him lay the eternal night. His mind—was it not already going? Nay only overburdened with the fearful weight of his unbelief. As a test he sent his memory back down the road of past time. Involuntarily he beheld his whole life pass before him in a series of vivid mental pictures. He lived again

THE PASSING ONE

through that short winter when he had known so strangely the daughter who had never again come into his life; through all the distant struggle of his curious love for the child of Jim Kent; the bitterness of his disgrace; Joan's marriage and flight with Courtenay; his own farewell to his city, and the departure with his wife; then the long years since, lived among other races; shunned always by his own people; eagerly accepted at first by foreigners of all classes; then hated by many of them for his denouncing of their ways, their tradition, and their stagnation, social and moral, set forth in, perhaps, the most powerful of his works; his life for many months among those Bohemians of his earlier years; then again, for a time, raised to high consequence by royalty itself, only to be dropped and forgotten upon the death of William; plunged into solitude and despair by the knowledge of his failing strength and advanced age at last. Forgotten! Forgotten! Forgotten! Those dreary syllables, pulsated by the hours, were pushing out his life. One slight sound, a low moan, passed his lips, but when his wife reached his bedside he was faintly smiling.

"Helen," he murmured, "here is Bob. Why don't you speak to him?"

"Ah, you are dreaming, Herbert!" sobbed the woman. But he did not hear.

"All here. Joan, and Bob, and Helen, my three. I am content now that I have seen you all again. I am old—you see. And there is Jim, Bob,—and Horace—they are well?"

"You are dreaming! Say that you are dreaming!

A SOCIAL LION

They are not here, dearest!" cried Helen, terrified now by a knowledge that she refused to admit to herself.

But Herbert Stagmar was beyond earth-voices. The hand was still his, but its touch was gone. The vision before his eyes was blue, and black, and glorious. His heart pounded furiously against the side of its prison-house. The noise of many waters filled his ears. About him the skies were rent and the stars blazed. A blinding phantasm from on high appeared to him through the torn clouds. He was still. Helen, below him, still watched the breath struggle through his lips.

Now, widely his eyes opened. He saw nothing through them. They closed again. In his bed, with supreme effort, he sat up, high and straight. His hands were uplifted. He gasped convulsively, and then three words just passed his lips.

"CREDO IN DEUM!"

The flesh fell heavily back. Herbert Stagmar had gone on, out, and up. Helen's straining eyes saw the pale shadow as it passed over the bed. No sound escaped her lips. She knew that a soul had beheld its Creator.

"A great life has passed into the tomb, and there awaits the requiem of winter's snows."

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